

The nature of the Labour Party—I

The British Labour Party is obviously one of the greatest political forces of the capitalist world. With its six million and more members, it is by far the largest of social-democratic parties. The twelve million votes cast in its favour at the last General Election were the votes of the majority of the working class—of a working class undivided on religious or ideological grounds, and sociologically the dominant class in an overwhelmingly proletarian nation. The Labour Party is no mere opposition party. It is used to power, although the modalities of that power may seem limited.

Such are the evident indices of the Labour Party's strength and importance. But inseparably associated with this strength there are less evident weaknesses, and both strength and weakness are aspects of a unique historical and political evolution full of its own characteristic contradictions, too little analysed until now. As a part of its well-known general antipathy to theory, the British Left has been notably averse to thinking critically about itself. The Labour Party did not come into being in response to any theory about what a socialist party should be; it arose empirically, in a quite piece-meal fashion, like so much in British bourgeois society before it. And it rapidly became accepted as a permanent, inevitable feature of that society—a kind of monument about which it was pointless, if not impious, to ask too searching questions. Something of the

mindless complacency of British bourgeois society was in this way transmitted to British socialism. And besides this, the Labour Party dominates the scene so totally in Britain, it embraces so much and has sunk such deep roots that any radical change in it seems unthinkable, out of the question—what criticism could affect a leviathan like this? The very proportions of Labourism defy analysis.

Any adequate account of the Labour phenomenon must, naturally, be historical in its orientation. And a historical analysis must bear in mind Gramsci's stricture to the effect that: 'the history of a party . . . cannot fail to be the history of a given social class . . . writing the history of a party really means nothing but writing the history of a country from a particular, monographic point of view, throwing one aspect of it into relief.'¹ This is perhaps especially true of a party like the Labour Party. Its empirical, undoctrinaire origins, the thoroughly indigenous nature of all its roots, signify a particularly intimate bond with the society that gave birth to it. Like other mass socialist parties, it is essentially a novelty—nothing else than the embryo of a new society altogether—but this element is concealed and qualified in its case by a singularly dense integument tying it to the past. This integument is at once party psychology, and mass psychology, the ideology and customs of Labourism and beyond them the reflexes of the Labour Movement and of the working class as a whole. It is linked to, and in part dependent upon, a specific kind of organization and bureaucratic control. It was the natural, effective instrument of adaptation of a working-class movement to a society which itself—during the whole existence of Labourism—leaned instinctively and whole-heartedly towards the past.

Only from an examination of this matrix as a whole is it possible to define the basic problems of Labourist socialism. This study, naturally, cannot hope to treat such a complex of themes other than summarily—to look for a correct approach to it, by asking questions, rather than by formulating answers. But we must also try to see to what extent the situation of the Labour Party under Harold Wilson is a new one. British society as a whole has begun to change more rapidly and consciously, after a long era of stagnation, generating a multitude of tensions and new contradictions. What new possibilities and dangers confront the Labour Party under these conditions? What new problems are being added to the old ones?

British trade unionism

After the defeat of Chartism began the greatest era of prosperity for British capitalism, the 25 years from 1850 until about 1875. Cyclical crises practically disappeared. 'Shortly before the middle of the century there began everywhere a substantial advance in the standard of living. At first this was due not to rising wages but to falling prices; but later, when prices again rose, wages . . . rose more than enough to meet them . . . Revolts and mass movements gave place to the well-organized but moderate trade unions and co-operative societies of the new order.'²

¹ Gramsci, *Note sul Machiavelli*, p. 22.

² G. D. H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement*, p. 126.

The epoch of integration had begun. This moderate trade-unionism, whose basic structure and outlook endure to this day, was to become the nucleus of Labourism. Not until 1918 did it turn aside, even nominally, from a general acceptance of the conditions of capitalist society.

While early trade-unionism of the Owenite period had been all-embracing in its organization and idealistic in its philosophy, trade unions after 1850 were fragmentary in structure and set themselves no general ideal greater than that of acceptance by the great Victorian bourgeoisie as 'respectable' institutions. Early trade-unionism had tried to organize all grades of workers. After the defeats, in changed economic and psychological conditions—the development of industry, and especially metallurgical industry, was producing wider differences between skilled and unskilled operatives—the trade unions became organizations of the 'labour aristocracy'. A fundamental aspect of the new unionism was, in the words of the major historians of British trade-unionism, 'the principle of the protection of the vested interests of the craftsman in his occupation'.³ The Preface to the rules of the most important of the new unions, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, actually compared the position of the skilled worker to that of the professional man: a qualified doctor, it points out, is entitled to certain privileges, and to protection by the law against charlatans—why should this not be true of the skilled worker who has gone through his apprenticeship? But since the law does not protect *his* 'privileges', the trade union must do so. On this narrowly corporative basis—directed against the employers, in the first place, but also against the mass of unskilled workers—were built up organizations of great strength and resilience. Indeed, this strength of the new 'craft unions' lay in their very limitations, as compared to the older and more ambitious bodies. Their corporativism echoed that of the working class as a whole, showing the same positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, it was a model form of working-class resistance, appreciated as such in many other countries—for instance, by the large delegation of Parisian workers which visited London for the Universal Exhibition of 1862.⁴ On the other hand, it was a form of integration into the characteristic hierarchies of Victorian society, an assimilative process affecting a vital sector of the proletariat. Politically, the new trade union leaders were committed to Liberalism—that is, to the classical British party of the industrial bourgeoisie, reposing on the twin pillars of Protestantism and Free Trade. Through them, the workers in effect allied themselves with the bourgeoisie against the power of the landlords, expressed in the Conservative Party. But not, as in underdeveloped countries, with a *weak* bourgeoisie struggling to assert itself against an all-powerful, regressive feudalism! In Britain, the agrarian question had in reality become completely secondary and the aristocracy could only govern in the general interests of the bourgeoisie even when in power—hence, the subordination of the working class to the Liberals was no more than a characteristic piece of mystification. Yet, until 1914 this tactic of diverting the political passions of the masses towards a fight against 'landed privilege' was to remain efficacious. David Lloyd George was its last great practitioner.

³ S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 199.

⁴ Bruhat, Dautry and Tersen, *La Commune de Paris*, p. 39.

It was this period that occasioned Engel's famous outburst: 'The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *as well as* a bourgeoisie.'⁵ Marx too thundered constantly in his letters, denouncing the 'sheepish attitude of the workers' and their 'Christian, slavish nature.'⁶ He did not make the mistake committed by so many later observers and critic of the British working-class movement—that of blaming exclusively the 'treachery' of leaders for what was wrong. It is doubtful, indeed, if any other working-class movement has produced as many 'traitors'—or at least as many *unashamed*, magnificently naked traitors—as has Labourism. But the angry denunciation of leaders in which sectarians and the Labour Left wing have always indulged has served only to conceal the underlying conditions of betrayal, the circumstances in the party, the movement, the class itself which have generated corrupt and half-hearted leadership. Labourism is a system which *cannot* be led by revolutionaries. To retrace the origins of Labourism in Victorian trade unionism is to see the inevitability of the moderation afflicting this, the nucleus of all later developments. If, in general, it is true to say that trade unions are 'a type of proletarian organization specific to the period when capital dominates history . . . an integral part of capitalist society, whose function is inherent in the régime of private property',⁷ the problem is to understand why classical British trade unionism shows such an especially profound and permanent subordination to the categories of its own capitalist society. The answer does not lie in the stupidity of leaders, or—as Marx cried in another moment of exasperation—in the biological traits of the British workers, those 'thick-headed John Bulls, whose brain-pans seem to have been specially manufactured for the constables' bludgeons'.⁸ With great energy and courage, the British workers had already proved this was not so.

Although always an organ of adaptation to capitalist society, trade unions have occupied a great variety of roles in the evolution of the working-class movement in different countries, and stood in different relationships to political and revolutionary organizations. But in Britain, from 1850 until around 1890, they were the working-class movement. There was nothing else. There were no socialist ideas or movements with any influence, until the 1880's there was not even a significant radical movement to which the workers could look for support. The voices of intellectual protest were few, and remote from politics and the working class: distorted by the immense pressures of Victorian conformity, they tended towards an impossible and Utopian rejection of capitalism and industrialism as such (as with Ruskin and William Morris) or retreated into obscurity and eccentricity (like the novelists Meredith and Samuel Butler). In such a void—following earlier defeat—profound subordination was unavoidable. With the passage of time, the bourgeoisie disposed of more and more ample means of corruption, both material and spiritual. Its world economic

⁵ Engels, letter to Marx, October 7th, 1858, in *Marx and Engels on Britain* (Moscow 1953), pp. 491–2.

⁶ Marx, letter to Engels, November 17th, 1862, in op. cit., p. 492.

⁷ Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo*, p. 36.

⁸ Marx, letter to Engels, July 27th, 1866, in op. cit., p. 495.

dominance enabled it to concede something to the superior strata of skilled workers, those involved in the first trade unions, while to all the inherent mystifications of British bourgeois society was added the sense of belonging to a superior race, that which owned a large part of the world and supplied the wants of the rest. Belonging to it was a kind of privilege, even in misery. From the 1880's onwards, when British capitalism was for the first time challenged on world markets, this feeling of superiority was enormously increased—instead of disappearing—by the new climate and mystique of imperialism.

The workers could not by themselves throw off the crushing weight of this complex of historical conditions. Resistance was only possible in the terms imposed by the system. For 40 decisive years, class conflict—whose concrete form is always determined by the entire field of social forces at any given time—was reduced to relatively mild and tolerable proportions. Bourgeois society had succeeded, at least temporarily, in assimilating the working-class movement. By the end of the period, habits and traditions had been formed, founded on the strength and prestige of the trade unions, enduring reflexes which impressed themselves on all that happened later.

The entire political existence of the British working class was conditioned by the prior existence of this trade unionism. Trade unionism was to dominate politics absolutely—the contrary of what happened in, for example the evolution of the German working class. When the workers began to think politically for themselves, slowly and still hesitantly, in the last decade of the century, they could only start from the accomplished fact of trade unionism. How could any working-class political movement have any success, if it did not somehow lean upon the trade unions and make use of their strength, their funds, their prestige? All the more so, because of the great expansion of the unions in the last ten years of Victoria's reign, after the London dock strike of 1889. This strike and the events following it constituted the entry into trade unionism of masses of unskilled workers. In part, the trade union movement was reconstructed on a less exclusive basis, with large 'general' unions of unskilled workers supplementing the old 'craft' unions. Total trade union membership rose in a few years from around 750,000 to one-and-a-half million, and by 1900 there were two million trade unionists.

This growth and partial change in the character of trade unionism had been produced by the more severe cyclical crises and generally more difficult conditions imposed on British capitalism since the ending of its world monopoly. It coincided with the beginning of serious socialist agitation in Britain, conducted by the first Marxist group, the Social-Democratic Federation (founded in 1883), the Fabian Society (founded in 1884), and the most important socialist party—and forerunner of the Labour Party—the Independent Labour Party (founded in 1893). And it gave rise to something of a counter-offensive by the employers, culminating in the Taff Vale court case (1901) when a legal decision in effect abolished the right to strike. The last two factors together moved the trade unions towards political action. But of the two, the second was alone really decisive—the trade union leaders were only

convinced of the necessity for working-class politics when such action became necessary to safeguard trade unionism itself.

The historical function of trade unionism—the function ‘inherent in’ capitalist society, in Gramsci’s words—was the protection of the workers’ material standards of life and work, through a constant struggle against the mechanisms of the capitalist system. In itself, this did not require a consciousness of the working class as being more than one section of society, with particular problems arising out of its particular situation. Its ideal does not have to be any more than that of obtaining a ‘square deal’ for the workers, in the general terms permitted by that situation. Such ‘economism’—as Lenin called it—can embrace political action or not, in differing circumstances. Indeed, it can involve the consciousness and action of the working class as a whole, or not, according to the needs and degree of evolution of the working class. The last decades of the century saw the British working class, through its trade unions, first of all acquire a more comprehensive consciousness of its essential unity (in contrast to the fragmentation of the craft unions), and then attempt to pursue its collective interests through forms of political action. But without stepping beyond the limits of ‘economism’.

A non-Marxist universe

Who were the socialists that tried, without success, to convert the trade unions to more ambitious ideas at this time? Plainly—in view of what was said above about the nature of British bourgeois society, and about the specific deprivations and mystifications inflicted on the British proletariat—the arrival of Marxist ideas in Britain should have been of the greatest importance. Was not Marxism the evident, only answer to the intellectual and political voids of British historical development? At once the natural doctrine of the working class, and the summing-up of the Enlightenment and all the highest stages of bourgeois thought into a new synthesis? Its superiority to British bourgeois conservatism was such, surely, that by appropriating it the working class could compensate for the burdens oppressing its evolution and attain its own *hegemonic* ideology? A few years after the foundation of the Social-Democratic Federation, however, Engels frankly admitted the problems it was confronting: ‘One can see that it is by no means easy to drill ideas into a big nation in a doctrinaire and dogmatic way, even if one has the best of theories, developed out of its own conditions of life . . .’⁹ In fact, the task was to prove impossible. The reason is, in part, that Marxism—in the elementary form embraced and propagated by the Federation—was *not* really developed out of the ‘conditions of life’ of Britain and the British proletariat. It was based upon an extensive analysis of the *economic foundations* of that life, certainly—but the dominating characteristic of social life in general was, precisely, the variety of ways in which those foundations were masked for the average consciousness, the web of false relations and ideas woven around them. Marx and Engels had devoted little time to examination of these superstructures. This cannot be considered a reproach to them, but it plainly

⁹ Engels, letter to Sorge, December 7th, 1889, in op. cit., p. 522.

imposed special problems to their disciples in Britain. A theory can only become practically effective and a cultural and political force when it is felt to echo experience; but experience, actual consciousness, is mediated through the complex of superstructures and apprehends what underlies them only partially and indirectly. Hence, in Britain it was vitally necessary to decipher social reality as a whole, in order that Marxism could penetrate the working-class movement. This required a creative development of Marxist ideas—Marxism can never be ‘applied’, every genuine use of it implies a development of the theory itself—on a very considerable scale. At this time, unfortunately, the British intelligentsia had other preoccupations. It was engaged on discovering Hegelian idealism and re-expressing it in the appropriate imperialistic terms (as in Bosanquet’s *Philosophical Theory of the State*, for instance, published in 1901); one sector had undertaken a timorous revolt against Victorian puritanism, inspired by G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, but this was confined strictly to ‘personal’ and ‘aesthetic’ terms.

As was indicated above, therefore, the nullity of native intellectual traditions proved to be the most serious of obstacles to socialism. The Marxists of the Social-Democratic Federation—and their later successors—were destined to remain a small and sectarian group. The leaders of Labourism thought that, however appropriate Marxism might be in foreign countries, it just had no reference to Britain. Nevertheless, some kind of theory was objectively necessary to the working-class movement. The trade unionists had adhered originally to *Laissez-faire* liberalism; when this was no longer possible and they had committed themselves to autonomous political action, they tried for as long as possible to avoid any doctrine justifying such action. Pure empiricism reigned during the first decades of labourist politics. When the movement had become a great mass force, however, threatening to depose liberalism politically (after the World War), empiricism had to be at least adulterated with something else capable of furnishing a minimum of cohesion. The void left by the failure of the Marxists had to be filled by the other socialist currents active from the 1880’s onwards.

‘British Socialism’

These indigenous theories were uninteresting and, in any wider perspective, quite unimportant. Essentially, they reflected nothing but the intellectual parochialism of the bourgeoisie, its complacent self-absorption and optimism. They adapted and transformed third-rate bourgeois traditions into fourth-rate socialist traditions, imposing upon the working class all the righteous mediocrity and worthless philistinism of the pious Victorian petty bourgeois. Fabian socialism was derived Utilitarianism, the timid and dreary species of bourgeois rationalism embraced by the British industrial middle class during the Industrial Revolution. In it, bourgeois rationalism became socialist rationalism chiefly through the substitution of the State for the magic forces of the *laissez-faire* capitalist market: the former was seen as bringing about the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’ almost as automatically as the latter had been. According to this ideology of

minor functionaries, although the working class made socialism *possible* (with their votes), the new society would actually be created by an eternal 'elite of unassuming experts . . . exercising the power inherent in superior knowledge and longer administrative experience'.¹⁰ The Independent Labour Party's socialism, on the other hand, was derived from the religion of the Protestant sects. This was possible because since the 17th century sectarian Protestantism had always been to a certain extent a movement of popular protest against the official or 'established' religion, Anglicanism, which was (unlike Catholicism) clearly seen *as* the religion of the ruling classes. Militant Protestantism died hard, in a nation whose great revolution had after all been carried out under the aegis of Puritanism. But long before the foundation of the Labour Party, this tradition had decayed into a relatively subordinate, impotent—and therefore acceptable—force, a kind of domesticated national voice of conscience, forever indignant at the 'excesses' of capitalism and at the iniquitous conduct of the very rich and the very poor alike (the vices of the latter being essentially identified with alcohol). Such was the cadaver passed on to the Labour movement. If the ideas of Fabianism were few and tedious, this post-Christian socialism had no ideas at all. The dissenting sects had viewed intellect with the gravest suspicion, as being probably associated with the Devil; the forms and attitudes of protest bequeathed by them to Labourism, therefore, could produce only a sort of ethical, sentimental socialism founded not upon any idea of what the world is objectively like but upon the conviction of its wrongness and injustice. Socialism, hence, was apprehended primarily as a moral crusade propelled by emotions of outrage at injustice and suffering. Speaking of the greatest propagandist of Independent Labour Party socialism, G. D. H. Cole points out how in spite of Robert Blatchford's immense influence as a journalist, 'his contribution to socialist *thought* . . . was next to nothing. He was neither a theorist nor a planner, and to socialist doctrine he neither contributed nor sought to contribute any original idea'.¹¹

It is of the utmost importance to grasp the relationship between these two currents of socialist ideology, for this relation has been the key structure of Labourist ideology. Although it came into being gradually with the gradual formation of the Labour Party from 1900 onwards, one can perceive what constitutes the link from a consideration of their respective essences.

In the first place, what they had in common was sufficient to permit them to come together in one body and act in alliance. They both accepted—the Fabians by clear conviction, the ILP socialists for want of an alternative—the *evolutionary* character of socialism. Socialism had to be constructed piece by piece, in discrete instalments, over a long period of time. This evolutionism, in effect, denied entirely that a decisive struggle for *power* played any necessary role in the process—the conditions of British bourgeois society had clothed the fact of power so

¹⁰ Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, p. 97.

¹¹ G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought*, Vol. III, Part I, p. 167.

well, and reduced the conflict of classes so much, that this mystification was entirely natural. The Fabians actually thought of the whole capitalist epoch in history as being, not the domination of one class over others, but a mere 'period of anarchy' in social affairs, a period of 'administrative nihilism' in between feudal administration on the one hand and the new collective, socialist administration on the other.¹² Society was recovering spontaneously from this deplorable anarchy, as State intervention and control were extended, and socialists had simply to assist this natural, healthy tendency by the appropriate propaganda and action in support of nationalization and municipalization. Since present society was not in essence a power-structure but a sort of historical mistake, socialism could not be a struggle to replace one hegemony with another.

The logical consequence of evolutionism was, in concrete terms, *parliamentarism*. That is, there could not be any good reason why parliamentary action should not suffice, to build socialism up piece by piece. Again, although the ILP was much less enthusiastic about parliament than the Fabians, it nevertheless accepted it in practice. Instinctively, the workers and advanced trade union militants in the ILP distrusted these things—but they saw no alternative, no other theory justifying their diffidence. So, how could they fail to be persuaded by such an orator as James Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the Labour Party for most of the first thirty years of its existence, and (as he liked to conceive himself) the 'poet of socialism'? 'The spirit of constructive socialism', intoned the hero, 'arises from political democracy. With the approach of the sun to the earth in spring, the breeze warms and the wayside bursts out into colour. Life is the companion of the hours of spring. So is socialism the companion of democracy . . .'¹³ If the British Parliament was 'democracy', in this ineffable conception, it was also a great deal more. Accepting it as one's life companion signified a great deal more for the nascent socialist movement than an easy march towards socialism. The British parliamentary system was no recently constructed, banal affair, a mere instrument of government; with its feudal origins and almost uninterrupted history, its antique rites and (even up to 1914) remarkably aristocratic composition, it was by far the most prestigious of assemblies. This immemorial institution could not be ignored, or merely *utilized* by socialists; the 'Mother of Parliaments' imposed her own conditions on whoever entered her. In other words, in Britain the parliament was an integral, central aspect of the entire complex of mystifications constituting bourgeois hegemony, a sort of living myth rather than a bourgeois machine. For centuries, the different sections of the British ruling class had been used to arrange their differences in it; its traditional two-party order expressed internal divisions inside a fundamentally united class, not a total class conflict—hence the mild and amicable customs it showed, its *camaraderie*, its well-known reputation as 'the best social club in the world'. The menace of such an atmosphere for Labourism, as the representative of a new class and a *real* class conflict, is obvious. And the problem was magnified by the great progress already realized by the old parties in adapting to the new age of mass democracy. There

¹² See Sidney Webb, 'The Basis of Socialism: Historic' in *Fabian Essays* (1889).

¹³ James Ramsay MacDonald, *The Socialist Movement*, p. 107.

had been very extensive adult male suffrage since 1867, and the Conservative and Liberal Parties had evolved from being groups of 'notables' into mass organizations seeking to exploit the new electorate—even on this plane, therefore, the new working-class political movement could not hope to change the political system, by asserting itself as a new type of party representing hitherto excluded masses. Everything combined to make it appear as simply a new competitor for votes on the political market, of essentially the same type as the other two; the system was prepared to absorb it, in every respect.

The common subjection to these ideas, and to this fatal context of political action, gave rise to the inevitable preponderance of one of the two socialist tendencies mentioned over the other. They signified the permanent hegemony of Fabianism, ideologically. The Fabians were in essence technicians of reform—perhaps the most able reformers of this kind produced by socialism in any country. Their whole interest and effort was always concentrated upon what was immediately possible for specific ends and in the actual condition of society; their acute sense of the possible, their great respect for the facts that concerned them, their armoury of information and argument, all these things made them *effective* reformers. And these perspectives were, naturally the perspectives proper to so-called 'evolutionary' socialism and parliamentarism. The socialists of the Independent Labour Party, by contrast, were predominantly working-class in origin (the party was strong above all in the great northern industrial towns, while the Fabians were Londoners) and lacked the formation and outlook of the technocrats. Their revolt against society was, in a sense, far more *real* than that of the Fabians: they reacted against capitalism with passion, they took the ultimate aim of the socialism movement seriously and wanted to see the beginnings of a real change in their own lifetime—not in some indefinite future state, at the end of an interminable series of partial reforms. *Instinctively*, they, in fact, rejected the perspectives of evolutionism and parliamentarism; but because they accepted the latter *intellectually*, they were constrained to accept the leadership of Fabians within the wider ambit of the working-class movement. Lacking ideas (that is, lacking intellectual cadres) capable of formulating what they felt, tied in the archaic web of neo-Protestant moralism, they never had a clear conception of what should be *done* practically in order to realize their socialist dream. The Fabians, on the other hand, invariably knew what to do. Some idea of their competence and presence can be gathered from the contents of the *Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission*, published in 1909. This report on the reform of the State assistance laws concerning the poor and unemployed, written mostly by the leading Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb, anticipates with great accuracy the entire development of social legislation since that date. It is, as G. D. H. Cole points out 'the first full working out of the conception and policy of the Welfare State—more comprehensive . . . than the Beveridge Report of 1942, which in many respects reproduced its ideas'.¹⁴

This meant, in effect, that within the limits of Labourism the actual

¹⁴ G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

modalities of action were dominated by the Fabians. The ILP tradition was destined to become—so to speak—the *subjectivity* of the political wing of Labourism, the emotions of the movement in contrast to its Fabian ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’. When the two traditions were united inside the Labour Party, other factors also contributed to the hegemony of Fabianism. But one can see how the Fabians were bound to be naturally in command—how ILP socialism, in spite of its working-class base, in spite of a certain authenticity of reflex and feeling rendering it infinitely more humanly admirable than Fabianism, could only become a ‘left’ opposition fixed in more or less impotent attitudes of protest. It was destined to become a left wing permanently, necessarily in rebellion against Fabian mediocrity—but unable to formulate and develop coherently this revolt, intellectually empty, paralysed inside the larger body of Labourism, a permanent minority opposition lacking the resources to assume hegemony of the movement in its turn.

Second-best socialism

These considerations may help us to identify the second fundamental problem of Labourism. Because of the size and power of trade unionism, it was—we saw above—bound to dominate the nascent political movement. The dilemma confronting all the socialist pioneers is described by Cole in these words (speaking of the Independent Labour Party): ‘They speedily realized that . . . they must either induce the trade unions to throw in their lot with them or be content to build up very slowly a party based on individual membership on the Continental socialist model. As they were not prepared to wait, most of them preferred the shorter cut of a Labour Party based mainly on trade union affiliations, even though they realized that they could get such a party only by a considerable dilution of their socialist objectives . . .’¹⁵ The Labour Party was, indeed, a kind of historical ‘short-cut’ to socialism (but a short-cut that has proved very much more long and difficult than the early socialists believed, perhaps longer than the alternative would have been). It did not emerge, however, only because the socialists ‘were not prepared to wait’. A complex combination of factors really determined the decision and made it certain that the growth of socialism could only proceed ‘very slowly’; we have tried to identify them above. The overpowering conservatism of British society, deeply embedded in the working class itself and now aggravated by imperialism; the failure of the intellectuals to attack this conservatism and provide the basis of a genuine ‘British socialism’; the slow evolution of all socialist ideas and the corresponding movement, in isolation from the movements in other European countries, leading to the dominance of the unions and their prudent, economist philosophy—all these things brought about the ‘second best’ solution of Labourism. When the unions finally agreed to co-operate in setting up a working-class political movement at the time of the Taff Vale decision, the socialists were in fact only too happy to accept the union’s conditions. The proposed political party would be not socialist, but devoted to ‘the direct interest of Labour’—that is, trade-unionism translated on to the political plane, a political party like a kind of super trade union representing the interests of the class as a

¹⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914*, p. 152.

whole in the way that an individual union treats the interests of its members. Although the trade unions were furnishing the finances and laying down the general orientation of the new party, the greater part of its active organizers and leaders were, naturally, socialists. The Fabian Society and the Independent Labour Party were affiliated to the new organization, in the same way as the trade unions, and furnished the cadres. Here was the matrix within which the character of British socialism was formed, the character which the Labour Party as a whole would assume when it became a socialist party, at last, in 1918.

It is the internal dynamic of this socialism which constitutes the second basic problem of the Labourist movement. We have already seen the elements found within it, and their relationship. In the Labour Party, Fabianism became the dominant, right-wing leadership tradition, the source of the ideas governing most of the action of the party. Its leaders were all to be either avowed Fabians (Attlee, Gaitskell) or implicit Fabians, whatever their apparent background and orientation (Macdonald, Henderson, Lansbury). The Independent Labour Party became the Labour left wing, in chronic instinctive protest against the leadership but intellectually subordinated to it and incapable of effectively replacing it. Labourism, therefore, acquired from the beginning *a peculiarly weak left*. This is, in a sense, the intimate tragedy of Labourism—for the left has always expressed the most vital working-class elements, the most active and genuine socialist forces *potentially* able to develop their own hegemony over party and State. But expressing them in the fashion and under the conditions indicated, the Labour left has really completely frustrated these forces, putting them at the disposition of the right-wing reformists. It has been unable even to seriously influence the leadership, except under rare circumstances and momentarily. Hence, the Fabian-inspired leadership tradition, permanently supported by the trade unions, could acquire a great stability and continuity—a kind of dynasty, in fact, with its own characteristic internal procedures of recruitment and co-ordination, almost independent of the party in general. And this permanent, organic power in its turn of course *obstructed* any farther real evolution of the left wing—it is as if the Independent Labour Party tradition, which was apparently the beginning of a real British mass socialist party, was *paralysed* by entry into the matrix of Labourism and the conditions it found therein. Hardie and the other ILP leaders anticipated that they would be able to rapidly convert the Labour Party to socialism, their socialism. Instead, the conditions of Labourism, and their own weakness, transformed them into a mere permanent opposition, always urging the Labour Party to move left and always unable to make it move, only half conscious of their own position and its true meaning, unable to act within Labourism but unable to see any alternative to Labourism, oppressed by Fabian triviality and timidity but with no workable alternative to offer—such was the result of the ‘short cut’ to socialism which Labourism had seemed to represent. Such was the paradox of Labourism—the distinctive form of socialism which arose out of British conditions, and in effect prevented any *farther* socialist evolution from taking place.

It can be seen, then, that the ‘left’ of Labourism is different in nature, and occupies quite a different function, from those of socialist parties

elsewhere. Its non-Marxist aspect is only one part of a much deeper peculiarity. Obviously, too, this peculiarity and all its consequences for the Labour Party, the second fundamental problem of Labourism, are closely connected to the first problem previously distinguished. In part, the Independent Labour Party's socialist tradition and then the Labour Party left wing have been what they have been because of a historical factor already discussed in this review: the integration of the intelligentsia into the general fabric of British conservatism, that secular, insular stultification which effectively prevented the intellectuals from contributing what was necessary to the emergent working-class movement, isolating the latter and throwing it back into second-hand, second-rate substitutes, a narrow and debased socialist culture inherently incapable of meeting the tremendous challenge of the struggles awaiting it. And both 'problems' of Labourism are, of course, from another point of view *defining characteristics* of Labourism. In the case of the left, for instance, it is clear that the Labour Party has only been able to become the one great political expression of the British working class and survive in the same form for so long, *because* it has had a left wing of the general type analysed. Other socialist traditions and ideas would not have been able to tolerate the Labour Party, and it would not have been able to tolerate them—schisms of the kind familiar in other movements would inevitably have occurred, decisively altering the political evolution of the working class and the whole nation.

Hypocrites and traitors

From 1906 onwards, the Labour Party functioned essentially as a kind of trade union 'pressure group' (or, more widely, as a 'pressure group' for the working class as a whole). It was not a very effective pressure group. Its supine acceptance of parliamentarism made of it for most of the time a subordinate attachment of the Liberal Party. Something of the evolution of the early Labour Party can be seen in the contrast between two statements by the same man, Ben Tillett, one of the trade union militants who had played a prominent role in founding both the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party. Speaking in 1893, he asserted that socialists should aim first of all 'to capture the trades unionists of this country, a body of men well organized, who paid their money, and were socialists at their work every day, and not merely on the platform, who did not shout for blood-red revolution, and when it came to revolution sneaked under the nearest bed . . . With his experience of unions, he was glad to say that if there were 50 such red revolutionary parties as there were in Germany, he would sooner have the solid, progressive, matter-of-fact, fighting trades unionism of England than all the hare-brained chattering and magpies of continental revolutionists'.¹⁶ Here was the authentic spirit of Labourism: proudly anti-theoretical, vulgarly chauvinist, totally deluded by the false social-democratic contrast between 'revolution' (conceived as 24 hours of 'blood-red' violence) and 'evolution' (conceived as a sort of arithmetic adding-up of socialism by little, regular instalments). Yet the same Ben Tillett, 15 years later, published a well-known pamphlet with the title *Is the Parliamentary Party a Failure?* in which he denounced

¹⁶ G. D. H. Cole, *British Working Class Politics, 1832–1914*, p. 141.

the Labour deputies as 'sheer hypocrites' who 'repaid with gross betrayal the class that willingly supported them'.¹⁷ But the Labour 'Parliamentary Party' was only the logical consequence of the outlook and policy Tillett himself had preached in 1893. 'Hypocrisy' and 'betrayal' were the natural result of the 'solid, progressive, matter-of-fact-economism and philistinism he had defended so complacently; ordinary trade unionists were *not* 'socialists at their work every day', and the Labourist assumption that they were and that a great political movement could be founded on them just as they were led to the creation of politicians who were not 'socialists at *their* work every day', either. The missing dimension characteristic of Labourism emerges clearly from Tillett's remark: socialist education, the complex, difficult task of changing consciousness to express (and, by expressing, develop) the instincts of the masses at their work every day. Labourism's relation to the class it represents is in essence a *passive* one. Historically, it accepts the working class and the organizations the latter evolved in its long development, the trade unions, as given, decisive facts—arriving late upon the scene, the organ of a class already profoundly adapted to the conditions of bourgeois society and imbued with its conservatism, it sees its function as no more than a continuation, a farther step in this evolution. But the evolutionary models at the root of Labourist thought and action are false. Their falseness is the crucial falseness of Labourism as a whole. The advance on to the political plane embodied in the Labour Party is not really another step on the same evolutionary road, a 'natural' process of growth on the same basis. There is a factor of novelty involved in it, requiring a more radical and complete change than the analogy allows—a qualitative change, as it were. The political plane is the plane of power: a political party lays claim to a specific form of hegemony over society as a whole, and a socialist party intends using such hegemony to remodel society. The problems of hegemony are of an order different from those confronting trade unions—at least, trade unions as they existed in Britain up to 1906. They impose upon a hitherto subordinate social class and its organizations a vast, energetic development, a new tension and perspective, violent and positive adjustments in the field of culture—if the hegemony is to be really new, in fact, a sort of metamorphosis. The drive towards this change does not arise mechanically from the working class—least of all from the British working class as it was in the imperialist era—and is not transmitted to political leaders by a passive link between the latter and the former.

An apparent paradox is the key to this typical central defect of Labourist socialism. The political potential of the working class is not realized when the political movement founded on it accepts as determinant the structures and outlook already created by the workers in their struggle as a subordinate class. These structures cannot *really* determine the form and content of a political movement—hence, as the entire story of Labourism so clearly demonstrates, when political parties embrace this basis they finish by being determined by quite different factors. That is, by the pressures of bourgeois society outside the proletariat, by paralysing conventions and myths. The miserable

¹⁷ See R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 28.

'respectability' of the new-born Labour Party, its abject political manoeuvrings, its lead-heavy 'moderation'—its whole apparatus of 'betrayal'—arose paradoxically from its purely proletarian basis. The latter apparently determined the nature of the political, socialist movement; but because in reality—for the reasons indicated—it could not do so, the effective political culture of the socialist movement was bound to be not proletarian but bourgeois. The way was left open for what may be more accurately defined as a sub-bourgeois political culture, for the sweepings of the great Anglo-Saxon ethos, a servile imitation of the ruling class's corpus of ideas and customs quite disassociated from the latter's historical *raison d'être*. The paradox functions even on the plane of personalities: to the solidly working-class character of the Labour Party's militants—immediately visible at any Labour Party Conference—there corresponded *necessarily* ruling cadres derived directly from the ruling class, imbued with its outlook and traditions, such as Attlee, Gaitskell, Dalton and many others.

Does this mean that the working class can only evolve a socialist movement truly expressing its political potential under the tutelage of revolutionary intellectuals, of an intelligentsia whose own sociological origins are not proletarian? This, in turn, is surely only one aspect of the truth. The conception of the intellectuals mechanically 'manipulating' the working class ('fomenting' trouble, in the classical reactionary image) is a mere antithesis to the conception of the political movement arising spontaneously out of the working class. In reality, only a dialectical relationship between leaders and masses, 'intellectuals' and 'executants', can create a genuinely proletarian and socialist political movement. And it was the absence of this dialectic which crippled and hypostatized Labourism in a mould that was to become chronic, resisting all later pressures for change. The historical failure of the intellectuals—the particular *'trahison des clercs'* incarnated in Labourism—signifies therefore not the lack of an elite mandarin class benevolently bestowing its wisdom upon the workers from above, but the lack of a kind of catalyst element a socialist movement requires in order to be itself.

Socialism, declared the poet of socialism in 1912, 'must begin with the facts of social unity, not with those of class conflict, because the former is the predominant fact in society'.¹⁸ So it was not surprising if, two years later, after its ignominious and subordinate parliamentary career, the new Labour Party plunged into active participation in the Great War. With even less difficulty than in other European countries, the official Labour Movement was transformed into an instrument of government policy. 'By 1914,' it has been pointed out, 'the more enlightened members of Britain's ruling orders had come to see the leaders of Labour *both* as opponents and as allies.'¹⁹ After 1914, they ceased for years to be opponents. The Labour Party took part in government for the first time when it entered the war-time coalition of 1915, and later played a more important role (with three Ministerial posts) in the new Lloyd George coalition of 1916. The war also led to a general weakening of socialist influence within the Labour movement, and to

¹⁸ James Ramsay MacDonald, *Syndicalism: a Critical Examination*, p. 50.

¹⁹ R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 38.

hostility between the trade unionists and the socialists of the ILP—chiefly because of the pacifist protest against the war among certain ILP leaders.

But if the Great War brought about a farther assimilation of the Labour movement, and a farther weakening of the already feeble socialist influence upon it, in other respects its effects were quite different. As so often in the Labour Party's history, one is in the presence of paradox. The Great War also *made* the Labour Party, in the form we know today, and constituted therefore an essential milestone in socialist development. War conditions forced the government to evolve a very extensive system of State control of the economy—including prices and rents—in a country previously devoted to 'laissez-faire'. This was seen by the Labour movement as a proof of the inadequacy of capitalism, and as a sort of 'war-time socialism' that could be preserved and extended after the war. A part of the Fabian vision was being realized in practice, before the eyes of the Labour movement, and this was far more persuasive than any rhetoric to the 'empirical', 'practical' trade union leaders. More generally, the shock of the war created a sense of new possibilities, and a vague demand for a new world, propitious to the advance of socialist ideas. Even the Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George felt in 1917 that he had to advise a Labour delegation that 'The whole state of society is more or less molten . . . you can stamp upon that molten mass almost anything, so long as you do so with firmness and determination. . . Think out new ways; think out new methods . . . Don't always be thinking of getting back to where you were before the war; get a really new world.'²⁰ In the same year, the Russian Revolutions added another stimulus. How strong this stimulus was, was demonstrated in one of the most extraordinary episodes of Labour Party history, the famous Leeds Convention of 1917. At this meeting, organized for the purpose of welcoming the Russian Revolution, British workers were astonished by the spectacle of the poet of socialism and other equally improbable personages supporting a resolution that demanded 'the establishment in every town, urban and rural district, of Councils of Workmen and Soldiers' Delegates (Soviets) for initiating and co-ordinating working-class activity . . . and for the complete political and economic emancipation of international labour.'²¹ This euphoric cry for a repetition of the Russian Revolution in Britain soon vanished without trace, but the fact that it happened at all showed how the Labour movement had become temporarily open to change and new ideas.

The modern Labour Party

Hence, the Great War accomplished what the small British socialist groups had not been able to accomplish. Under the influence of these great external pressures, the Labour movement as a whole moved towards the acceptance of a form of socialism: at last, the Labour Party could become a socialist party and not a mere trade union party. But, because this happened at a time when the socialists themselves were

²⁰ Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1917, p. 163.

²¹ S. Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution*, p. 38.

particularly weak, it took the shape of an absolutely *minimal* conversion to the new idea. The socialists were in a poor position to foster and push farther the process of conversion. If the majority of trade union leaders liked the abstract notion of socialism more than previously, they disliked and distrusted most actual socialists more than previously and were not prepared to envisage a radical transformation of the Labour Party. The key figure in the transition was Arthur Henderson. He saw that the possibility existed for the Labour Party to become a real, national political party, and that a real political party must have an ideology—in the case of the Labour Party the new ideological appeal *could* only be socialist in orientation. One more prudent, empirical step forward, one more cautious phase of British ‘evolution’, one more insanely complex compromise, and the instrument of British socialism was there at last, occupying its proper place in the British firmament mid-way between the House of Lords and the Boy Scouts. The product of endless, grudging, political manoeuvrings and an infinity of sorry compromises, a half-hearted mixture of socialism, trade-unionism, Protestant moralism and all-engulfing respectability, the Labour Party arrived haltingly and late upon the historical scene; yet its arrival also coincided with, and partly expressed, new and wider stirrings in the consciousness of the masses and in spite of its shortcomings it powerfully developed this consciousness. The new horizons it offered were part mirage, part real. Time would disentangle the two—as we shall see. But to present new, partly autonomous perspectives to the working class, even with so many qualifications and defects, and so late, was a great, permanent achievement in this country of the past.

A new constitution was drafted for the Party (principally by Henderson and Sidney Webb), and approved at a special Conference in February 1918. It remains in force today, with only minor changes. The new constitution was designed to give the Party a new organization corresponding to its new ideology and ambitions. Hitherto, it had been simply a collection of ‘affiliated’ organizations, mostly trade unions and socialist groups, and had had no individual members of its own; now it was to recruit members like other social-democratic parties. Hitherto, it had led an uncertain, mediate existence in an undefined limbo somewhere between politics and trade unionism; now the political embryo was to develop into a full political being, with real political aims, drawing its force from a nationwide network of political militants instead of from other organizations, at second hand.

The speeches and discussions about the new constitution show a consciousness of how important the change was. This was something like a re-birth of the Labour Party. Consciousness, however, again fell far short of the objective implications of the development, as had happened at the birth of the Party. We saw already how new and great the problems of a socialist political movement are, in comparison with those of trade unionism, how exacting are the new dimensions of power; in 1917 and 1918, Henderson and the other leaders still only partially recognized these dimensions. To the original ‘short-cut’ of Labourism they could only add another empirical, improvised ‘short-cut’ in the general direction of socialism.

The social changes envisaged by socialism are vast. They can only be

realized by generations of men, through difficult struggles we are only beginning to understand. And if any one thing is certain about socialism, it is that such changes—if they are to be conscious and controlled—require the dedication and active participation of vast numbers of people. They cannot be brought about by a few dozen party leaders, or a few hundred men in a parliament, whatever the laws they make. But what is a party's way to such mass energy, to a harnessing of the popular will which alone can really bring a new social order into being? Its way is the people in it, its socialist militants, those now commonly referred to even on the left by the odious label of 'the rank and file'. From a socialist point of view, they *are* the party and the movement, it is they who can turn ideas into a material force and become the guiding nucleus of otherwise indeterminate energies. Because of what socialism will be, and because a socialist party must as far as it can prefigure this feature in its own existence, it follows that socialists must be conscious of being the movement, must feel that it is theirs and entirely governed by them—because an all-embracing democracy will be part of socialism, it cannot fail to be a constitutive element of any real socialist movement. Hence, one may say that certain principles of organization follow from the very meaning of socialism, and impose themselves upon any socialist party. Whatever problems lie in the way of such democracy—problems indicated by many critics in the past—the effort to realize and maintain it is nevertheless a fundamental obligation of any socialist party, and one of the vital indices of its real nature.

We have already seen something of the ideological deficiencies of the British socialist tradition. In the events of 1918 and the new Labour Party constitution we see crystallizing *organizational* deficiencies that precisely parallel such cultural weakness, and render it permanent by embodying it in a great new national structure. This aspect of Labourism is little understood or remarked upon—yet it is clearly of fundamental importance, and any discussion or criticism of Labourism not taking it into account can only be superficial. Within the Labour Party itself, one finds the greatest confusion about simple organizational questions, and the most total ignorance about how the Party works and ought to work. The Labour Right has customarily ignored these problems for the good and sufficient reason that the present organization of the Party keeps them permanently in power; they study the niceties of its manipulation, not the principles of its structure. The Left has ignored them, because it has always felt—with characteristic moralism—that men's souls can be converted to the cause by preaching, however they happen to be organized. And if socialists themselves are not concerned to understand their organization—that is, their own society, their way of life—why should those outside the Labour Party understand it better?

In fact, the Labour Party's organizational structure is a perfect embodiment of the whole historical experience of the Labour movement in Britain, and incarnates both its achievements and its failings. Arrived at 'empirically', that is by a blind series of piecemeal compromises among various historical forces, it naturally expresses on the practical plane the dominant balance of such forces. But we saw how in Britain the dominant pattern of working-class life and institutions had, in-

evitably, become a conservative one capable of generating at most a kind of class-sectional or corporative outlook. The trade unions were the guardians of this outlook, as well as of the standard of living of the workers. Hence, the continuation of their hegemony over the Labour Party after 1918 meant the continued hegemony of this outlook within Labourism—whereas the objective task posed to socialism in Britain was the reform of this world-view, this fruit of subordination and defeat, it remained fixed in the heart of socialism itself, the rock-like basis upon which the Labour Party was built. The re-birth of 1918, the step into the future of socialism, was also a step back into the past, a decision to remain anchored in the history whose outlines we considered previously. There is no better illustration of the true meaning of British ‘empiricism’ or ‘evolutionism’ than the story of the Labour Party’s formation. This philosophy of cautious, practical realism and profound respect for the past, a perfect ruling-class intellectual organ tried and tested through centuries of experience, was inherited by the working class—as we saw—for lack of anything better or more fitting; deprived of its original purpose and *raison d’être*, it immediately turns into something else altogether, and all its principal characteristics assume a different sense. Realism turns, in Labour leaders, into mere cowardice, a kind of timid hypnosis in the face of events; practicality turns into wilful short-sightedness, a ritual pragmatism wielded to exorcise the sort of theoretical thinking socialism requires; dignified reverence for the past becomes a depraved fetish-worship of idols which seem to change into dust at the very touch of such falsity—the symbols of a nationalism whose significance should, after all, be transformed utterly by the social revolution Labourism nominally stands for. Born out of an iron ring of conceptions like these, the modern Labour Party could only be a compromise. Not a crafty, innocent compromise of the kind the British are forever boasting about, but one in which all the forces pressing towards the future ate mortgaged absolutely to the past and have the life drained from them in useless, secondary struggles.

The dead souls of Labourism

Transforming itself into a socialist party, the Labour Party remained an organ of trade unionism, a trade union ‘pressure-group’. The one was simply grafted on to the other. In theory, as with other political parties, the controlling body of the Party is the Annual Conference. Over 80 per cent of the votes which can be cast at this Conference come from the trade unions: in recent years they have represented about five million members, as against the one million members from the individual members and militants of the Party. This vast mass of inactive members are counted, like Gogol’s dead souls, as so many votes at the Labour Party Conference, far outweighing those of the active members.

It may be objected that, surely, a high proportion of active trade unionists must be Labour Party activists was well. Does not this redress the balance to some extent? In reality, it serves only to accentuate the paradox of the dead souls of Labourism, for in most cases, of course, the trade unionist actively supporting the Party is *also* an ‘individual’ member enrolled in one of the Constituency Parties. A high proportion of the individual militants are, naturally, trade unionists.

The great double political effort of the latter, in the trade unions and the Labour Party directly, cannot however come near equalling the crushing weight of the dead souls, the purely nominal voices which theoretically govern the destiny of the Labour Party, and sometimes of Britain as a whole.

Because they are dead souls, and not an active political force, these voices cannot, of course, really have this power. They are wielded by the men who do have the power, that is, the delegates to the Labour Party Conference. These delegates are, in fact, representatives of the *leaderships* of the different trade unions, of the great variety of bureaucratic organs which control British trade unionism. A few large unions, in turn, have a preponderant share of the trade unions majority.

In what sense, then, is this great power employed by the trade union leaders? British trade unionism is not a centralized or coherent force—like everything else, it grew up on an empirical, piecemeal basis and no later attempts at rationalization have succeeded. Hence, no one line is represented by the trade union delegations at the Labour Party Conference. However, although a small minority of unions are traditionally left-wing in orientation, the substantial majority has consistently, throughout the Party's history, supported characteristic Fabian policies of extreme caution. We discussed above some of the reasons for the corporative and conservative attitudes of the working class. They are commonly found in their most aggressive form among trade union bureaucrats, who rise to power entirely within the ambit of this narrow, tradition-bound type of trade unionism and identify its categories with their own success and position.

Earlier, we examined the nature and relationships of the socialist currents present in Labourism, and saw how the dynamic inherent in them led to a kind of Fabian hegemony over a chronically weak left wing. Now, it is possible to see how this dynamic takes its place within the larger dynamic of the Labour Party. Fabianism was intrinsically superior to Labour Leftism, and in the British context was bound to dominate it unless it could evolve greatly and find a superior intellectual expression. But the Labour Party's distinctive organization also gives a permanent bureaucratic form to such dominance, and imposes a permanent bureaucratic barrier to the further evolution of the Left. Although there are a few exceptions—the most notable case has been Ernest Bevin—the trade unions have not used their power in the Labour Party to elect trade unionists into the leadership of the Party in parliament. Their hegemony has not brought about the active hegemony of trade unionism over all the other elements in the movement—for the simple reason that, as was pointed out already, British trade unionism did not contain within itself the capacity needed for political and cultural hegemony, even the minimal hegemony of a right-wing social-democratic party. It could only result in the active hegemony of the intellectual group most congenial to the majority of trade union leaders, the moderate Labour Right. The permanent alliance between these forces—sometimes called simply the 'labour alliance'—has been the heart of Labourism, the central nerve slowly evolved through the dark empirical processes we have observed. The British trade union leaders

have always made clear their distrust of 'intellectuals', their innate reverence for the 'practical' and for moderate, unintellectual 'reasonableness'. Nevertheless, in the Labour Party they have always, in fact, maintained in power a clique of intellectuals, through their agency one particular stratum of the intelligentsia has been able to achieve an extraordinary unity and continuity of domination over the British working-class movement. The clue to this paradox lies, naturally, in the characteristics of the stratum in question. It is composed of a type of 'intellectual' who does not, in a sense, appear *as* an intellectual because of his profound acceptance of the prevailing categories of social existence. Contemptuous of rebels, the British trade union bureaucrats could only bestow power upon the unrebelling, traditional intelligentsia—upon 'intellectuals' reared within the old conformity of British intellectual life, educated in the customary fashion at the ancient universities, and wishing to change society not against but in accordance with its essential taboos. If, therefore, the corporative tendencies of trade unionism represented a sort of instinctive, primitive conservatism, by means of the 'labour alliance' this is joined to a much more refined and intellectually elaborated conservatism, to the deeply rooted, solid, but very un-radical traditions of the British liberal intelligentsia. In this coalition of forces, the ideological dead-weight of the past upon the working class assumes a precise organizational form. The British form of socialism, the force of the future, remains deeply and paradoxically tied to the past, not only in its ideas and sentiments but in its practical structures.

Parliamentary socialism

One might say that the design of Labourism systematically *alienates* the socialist militant, the individual member who is in the movement primarily out of his political conviction and who naturally feels that socialism is something to be realized within the horizons of the living. Labourism inevitably canalizes such revolutionary energy, since it is the unique representative of the working class and of indigenous socialist tradition; it exploits its socialists, who have always played the most important of roles in the everyday functioning of the Party; and ultimately it frustrates them in virtue of its very character, alienating all the forces which will not yield to built-in mediocrity. Yet so far we have only seen one dimension of this alienation. In the Party as a whole, as a social organism of national scale, the dead souls of political trade unionism are the determining factor. Through the block-vote majority a right-wing majority on the National Executive Committee is almost automatically secured. The most important recent analyst of British political parties points out that the trade unions 'can determine, if they wish, who shall occupy 18 of the 28 places on the National Executive Committee.'²² The same author shows how this majority has invariably conformed to the political line proposed by the right-wing parliamentary leaders, and how—since the more important trade-union leaders prefer to devote their time to trade-union affairs, within their own unions or on the General Council of the Trade Union Congress—it has consisted 'at almost every stage in the modern history of the party. . . of

²² Robert McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (2nd edition), p. 517.

second and sometimes third rank union leaders . . . prepared to play a modest role and support the initiative of the Leader of the Party'.²³ Yet such omnipresent modest mediocrity is only one type of obstacle interposed between the Labour Party's genuine socialists and power. For the National Executive Committee is not, in reality, the ruling body of the Party. In theory, the Annual Conference is the mainspring of the Party, the source of its power; and the National Executive Committee is the organ of the Conference, existing to realize Conference decisions. In theory, the socialists of Great Britain meet once a year to decide the destinies of Labourism, to orient the Party anew and lay down new policies democratically. In theory, therefore, the members of the NEC and the Labour Members of Parliament are simply their agents. And indeed how could it be otherwise? As we observed, how can a real socialist movement be anything but radically democratic, how can socialists be themselves except in a party they feel to be entirely theirs—a party whose essence defies the alienation of the society outside it ?

In practice, the NEC is a subordinate body in the Labour Party. So is the Annual Conference, and indeed most of what one understands by 'the party', the whole national and local organization, the mass of ordinary members. The 'Party', in this sense, exists to serve another organ, another 'Party' which appears almost as separate and autonomous, the head in relation to which the rest functions as a supporting body. This organ is, of course, the Parliamentary Labour Party. While the constitution, the formal organization, of the Labour Party accords supremacy to the Annual Conference and the NEC, the *real* dynamic of its organization places ultimate power with the group of Labour Members, in the Mother of Parliaments.

The ideological subservience of Labourism to parliamentary necromancy was mentioned above, and its relation to British evolutionism. This too has its practical, organizational expression in the Party's physiology. We saw how the lateness of the Labour Party's coming prevented it from being an innovator on the general scene of British political life. The age of mass politics arrived before it, the great bourgeois parties had already adapted themselves considerably to the exigencies of a huge new electorate by the end of the 19th century. But they did so, naturally, in accordance with bourgeois traditions—that is, empirically and untheoretically, altering the substance and leaving the external forms intact as far as possible. Once, parliaments were the direct, organic expression of the ruling class and of the (relatively) secondary divisions found within that class. In Britain as elsewhere the 'notables' assembled in an institution whose symbolic supremacy reflected the true pattern of social power. The enfranchisement of the masses changed the whole character of political life: it either introduced, or threatened to introduce, the class conflict into political life. The only way this new, menacing force could be either expressed or—on the other hand—controlled and checked was by the formation of the essential organs of modern politics, the mass political parties of the late 19th and 20th centuries. In the case of Britain, their emergence was brilliantly chronicled by the French theorist Ostrogorski.

²³ Robert McKenzie, op. cit., p. 519.

As he pointed out, the formation of these great political machines meant that in reality parliament could no longer be itself the supreme power in the State, in the old fashion. Instead, it was bound to be transformed progressively into a mere terrain of conflict among the parties, the means of access to power—an instrument in a conflict, as it were, no longer the unique, unequivocal voice of permanent social hegemony. The mystique of the elective parliament was disappearing in—as he thought—the chaos and corruption of party-political life. In Britain, however, this process was by no means carried through to its logical conclusion. While the traditional ruling-class parties, the Conservatives and Liberals, did become great machines of this type they were also successful in *concealing* the transformation and in preserving the essential mystique of Westminster and the facade of the Old British Constitution. The machines, the ‘parties’ in the distinctive contemporary sense, remained subordinate to the groups of Liberals and Conservatives elected to parliament—the ‘parties’ in the old sense of notable factions. To this day the names of the parties do not appear beside the names of the candidates on election ballot papers in Britain. The parties outside parliament remained, from a constitutional point of view, bodies with no *right* to control parliament and parliamentarians, and lay down the policies of the ‘parties’ inside parliament.

Obviously, this was a fundamentally conservative tactic aimed at avoiding the possibly dangerous consequences of the new régime of parties. It was a constitutional equivalent of the conservatism we have already observed in other fields. For the hitherto subordinate masses, for the new working class and socialist movements seeking to fight on their behalf, the democracy of the parties was of course the only *possible* kind of democracy—the great party machine which represented a hideous threat to Ostrogorski and other nostalgic apologists for the *status quo*, represented emancipation to them, the only kind of collective self-expression permitted by the conditions of bourgeois society. But it could only fulfil their need by being a genuine innovation—in other words, by definitely establishing the ascendancy of the new mass organization over its delegates in parliament, by providing a basically democratic link between the masses and the representatives claiming to be carrying on their struggle at that level. Only in this way could the class struggle in social reality hope to find any voice in politics. This is precisely what the ‘British Constitution’ tries to avoid. This is the true meaning of the clearly anachronistic interpretations of it prevalent since the end of last century. And this was the trap laid for the Labour movement by British parliamentarism—the trap into which it fell completely and blindly, and from which it has never emerged. Recent developments in the Labour Party, which we will examine later on, have indeed powerfully confirmed its parliamentary servitude.

Summing up the evolution of Labourism in this respect, McKenzie observes that the origin and essential significance of the two principal modern parties were quite different: ‘While the Conservative Party in Parliament created a mass organization to serve *its* purposes, Labour began as a movement in the country which created a parliamentary party to give the working class a voice in the House of Commons . . .’²⁴

²⁴ Robert McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

Nevertheless, he continues, this apparently vital difference was soon forgotten, for the Labour Party ‘. . . began increasingly to resemble the other great parliamentary parties as it came to rival them in size and strength. By the time the Parliamentary Labour Party had taken office in 1924 its transformation was almost complete. By accepting all the conventions with respect to the office of Prime Minister and of Cabinet government it ensured that effective power within the Party would be concentrated in the hands of the leadership of the P.L.P.’ The new democracy of the Labour movement had been obliterated by the old democracy of the British Constitution. The Labour Party, too, was to become merely an electoral machine in the service of parliamentarians. The British ruling class had acquired, so to speak, a double defence against socialism: in practice, the modern party system itself—even where the domination of parliament by the parties is assumed—has usually been a heavy brake on the class struggle, but at the same time the system necessarily contains a dangerous *potential* for change or even revolution that can never be quite forgotten, and British constitutional custom is in essence a barrier against the party system in its characteristic modern form, a unique first line of defence insuring old England against *all* the risks and perils of the modern political world. The ancient ‘supremacy’ of parliament in political life was conserved, as a corrupting fetish that separated the political leaders of the working-class movement from their mass following and utterly broke the democracy that is a pre-condition of socialism.

How has this almost inconceivable imbroglio been tolerable to Labour Party militants? In part, because of the chronic theoretical inertia of even the left wing; in part, because of the extraordinary ignorance of the Party already referred to among the Party members themselves, which allowed myths to flourish wholesale. The most important of such myths was the idea that the Annual Conference and the NEC decided the ‘general lines’ or the ‘objectives’ of Party policy, while the Parliamentary Labour group had the function of realizing these principles in parliamentary terms. It was Aneurin Bevan himself who stated that the PLP was to ‘interpret policies in the light of the parliamentary system. Any other procedure would merely confuse the whole situation’.²⁵ It does not seem to have struck him how totally, permanently, inextricably ‘confused’ the situation was already, since by a permanent and fortunate coincidence the PLP was always able to control what happened at Annual Conferences and so exactly *which* policies it was going to ‘interpret’. He emphasized the point farther in the same speech: ‘It is quite impossible for a conference of 1,100 people, *even if it were constitutionally proper*, to determine the order in which the Parliamentary Labour Party and a Labour Government introduces legislation into the House of Commons . . .’ Much of the misery of Labourism is concentrated in these words. The quasi-divine secrets of parliamentary ritual, incomprehensible to the dull minds of simple socialists. The rules of the ‘British Constitution’, absolute limits to all human thought and action. And all in the mouth of the greatest of Labourism’s rebels, addressing dismayed militants who, in attempting to do the simplest thing in the world—assert their collective democratic right of control—

²⁵ Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1947, pp. 212–14.

were merely 'confusing the whole situation'! Superficially, in so much of its thought and action, British labourism appears as woodenly practical and dull, sunk in hopelessly dusty routines and indescribably boring rhetoric. Yet a disabused analysis of its true character brings constantly to light a crazy logic reminiscent of the wanderings of Alice in her child's Wonderland, an upside-down impossible world where incredible contradictions are so natural that they no longer cause an eyebrow to be raised.

The dynamic of Labourism appears to conservatives as a kind of reassuring stability, a permanent insurance policy against 'extremists' and 'socialist cranks'; to socialists, it appears rather as an ingenious vicious circle designed to perpetually promise advance towards socialism and perpetually move away from it in reality. Tracing out the main lines of the Labour Party's anatomy, we have seen how the circle works. Its mainspring is the solid, conservative pillar of the trade-union majority, the flock of ghost-members whose votes are manipulated by the trade-union leaders. This is—suitably enough—the main body of the army supporting the Fabian right-wingers. They count on it to secure them a reliable majority at the Annual Conference and on the National Executive Committee, but even if—as has happened just *once* on an important question in the Party's history—the dead souls refused to be regimented into line, this would not be fatal to the Right. Controlling the Parliamentary Party, it can and has maintained that, in any case, what happens at Annual Conferences is without importance. The Labour MP's are elected by their constituents, according to the principles of the Constitution, which states that their first responsibility is to those electing them and their second responsibility is—to their own consciences! The Labour Party outside parliament has no right to come between an MP and his conscience! This would be rank totalitarianism, as Gaitskell chose to put it. Of course, the system would be breached were it possible for the Left to gain a majority of MP's within the Parliamentary Party. But, although it is possible for a fairly constant minority of left-wingers to find their way into the PLP, the Party leadership and the trade unions together exert sufficient control over the processes of candidature to guarantee their authority in this respect as well. But, at the same time, the pretence or myth of the Labour Party's democratic character is invariably maintained on the level of rhetoric. The painful and shameful impotence of the socialist militants at the base of the Party has never been more neatly and cruelly depicted than by Richard Crossman, in a moment of lucidity: '... the Labour Party required militants,' he has pointed out, 'politically conscious socialists to do the work of organizing the constituencies. But since these militants tended to be "extremists", a constitution was needed which maintained their enthusiasm by apparently creating a full party democracy while excluding them from effective power. Hence the concession in principle of sovereign powers to the delegates at the Annual Conferences, and the removal in practice of most of this sovereignty through the trade union block vote on the one hand, and the complete independence of the Parliamentary Labour Party on the other.'²⁶

²⁶ R. H. S. Crossman, introduction to *The English Constitution* (new edition) by Walter Bagshot, 1963.

Nonentities, fanatics, cranks and extremists

Such was the improbable political machine built up from 1918 onwards. It was built up around a word: 'socialism'. Looked at critically, in relation to the actual functioning of the Labour Party, this word seems in turn dream and utter delusion, justification and mask, essence and mere appearance. The essential meanings attached to it were as clearly expressed at the 1918 Annual Conference as at any later occasion; they are little changed today. The new constitution of the Party contained 'Clause 4', committing the movement 'To secure for the producers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service'.²⁷ Even then, at its moment of most daring advance, the language of Labourism was tired and bureaucratic: the future of mankind was dressed in words raked out of the bottom of a minor functionary's filing-cabinet. But the spirit behind the words inspired even less faith in their supposed meaning. In the very first debate on the very first resolution proposed by the NEC to the first Conference after the adoption of the new constitution, the issues were made sufficiently clear. This resolution was about 'Social Reconstruction' after the Great War, and envisaged '... the gradual building up of a new social order based ... on the deliberately planned co-operation in production and distribution, the sympathetic approach to a healthy equality, the widest possible participation in power, both economic and political, and the general consciousness of consent which characterizes a true democracy'.²⁸ It was not easy to pierce this astounding miasma of well-turned clichés. But the more clairvoyant of the left-wingers noticed the absence of any definite reference to the *ownership* of the means of production and distribution, and a Mr Fairchild of the British Socialist Party²⁹ rose to protest. This resolution was hardly in accordance with the fine new constitution, he pointed out, and might even be interpreted as advocating 'co-operation' between workers and employers. 'The resolution entails the creation of an army of bureaucrats and experts', he insisted, 'and there is no recognition of the claims of *Labour* to direct the means of production in the interests of the class represented at this Conference ...'.³⁰ No less a person than the father of Fabianism, Sidney Webb, came to reply to Fairchild—a typical example of the left-wing group Webb collectively characterized elsewhere as 'nonentities ... fanatics, cranks, and extremists ...'.³¹ It was true, he admitted it, that the constitution said what Mr Fairchild claimed. But really, they all had a great deal of work to do, including no fewer than 26 more resolutions and '... they did not want repeatedly, over and over again, to ring the changes on the old shibboleths ...'.³² It is a little hard to see how the *first* discussion of the Party's new objective could be a monotonous repetition of anything ... but, of course, this is precisely the point.

²⁷ G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party from 1914*, p. 72.

²⁸ Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1918, p. 43.

²⁹ Op. cit., p. 44.

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 44.

³¹ Beatrice Webb, *Diaries*, May 19th, 1930.

³² Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1918, pp. 44 and following section.

Once was, indeed, far too often for Webb and the leadership majority—for them, the great new principle and hope, the new socialist image assumed by the party was already a ‘shibboleth’ to be evaded in all the concrete work of the Party. Socialism, in short, belonged in its proper place, the constitution, where it could be admired occasionally and referred to in moments of emotion. The nonentities, fanatics, cranks and extremists who wished to relate it in a significant fashion to the actual *work* of the Labour Party had to be suppressed. Another lesson was administered to them in the discussion of resolution number VII. This dealt with unemployment, and accomplished the not inconsiderable feat of omitting all reference to the cause of unemployment, the capitalist system. Would it not be better to attack the capitalist system openly, someone objected, and so demonstrate to the ruling class their outlook and intentions? Again Webb rose to answer the objection. It was quite unnecessary to ‘. . . bring in once again an old shibboleth. They had heard the same speech over and over again . . . and it got a bit monotonous’. Capitalism, as the cause of social evil, and socialism, as its cure; both were ‘shibboleths’ to the Labour Right, at the very foundation of the modern Labour Party. It is quite wrong to think that the leadership has ‘betrayed’ socialist principles, at any of the later dramatic turnings in the Party’s history. ‘Betrayal’ was always an integral part of it, inseparable from it. Nor was this betrayal the result of individual hypocrisy or moral degeneration, as the Left has too often said; it followed logically from the whole orientation of Fabianism. Evolutionism, or ‘gradualism’, divorce the end-state of socialism from the actual steps taken to achieve it: the former exists at an intangible distance from the latter, hence they cannot be judged solely by their efficacy in promoting it—they are seen as good ‘in themselves’, justifiable by more immediate criteria deriving from society as it is here and now. The Left, on the other hand, wants each step to be meaningfully *related* to the end—an insistence which *is* fanatical and extremist, in evolutionary perspectives.

This tension—or something close to it—has existed in all socialist and communist parties. The peculiarity of the Labourist version lies in the relative strength and character of the two poles creating the tension. As we saw, for many different reasons the right-wing, moderate tendency was exceptionally powerful in Britain—it was, and still is, rooted in the profound and diffused conservatism of British society, of a social régime that had succeeded better than most others in suffocating the class struggle. And the left-wing pole of force provided by Nonconformity, traditional radicalism, and the ILP and Labour-left tendencies was exceptionally weak—and even subordinate to the other in vital respects. Objectively, the task set to the Left is the overcoming of this tension *dialectically*, through an ideological and practical synthesis uniting the immediacy of reforms with the remoter ideal of a socialist society. Incapable of rising to these difficult heights, the Labour Left is forced into crude and repetitious formulations of its position, into a mindless passion which is only the obverse of its ideological subjection. We saw how the Labour Left wing was, as it were, the ‘subjectivity’ of the movement, and how the distinction of Right from Left in Labourism is like a distinction between a barren—and therefore petty and cramped—intellect, and an impotent source of feeling, a passion with no voice.

The analogy can be carried farther. The profundity and apparent permanence of the determining conditions have made of the Labour Left a *neurotic* subjectivity—that is, a contradictory complex of ideas and attitudes unable to comprehend its own nature but also *unwilling* to do so, detesting the terrible weight lying upon it and yet completely loyal to Labourism, gripped in an oppressive dream which it *chooses* and clings to rather than face a reality still more painful. The ‘short-cut’ to socialism embraced so eagerly at the beginning of the century has turned into a permanent, intolerable labour of Sisyphus—but would not the Labour Party’s socialists be even more impotent if they renounced the labour, and abandoned the Party as hopeless? The failure of the Communist Party, and a desert of futile left-wing sects, stand as a warning against this.

Hence, the extreme and constant inner tension generated by Labourism has never exploded. Its own inherited inadequacies, and the evident lack of any practical alternative to the Labour Party, have tied the socialists of the left wing remorselessly into the pathological internal dialectic of Labourism. We saw how two basic conditions of Labourism as a system were, firstly, the very defective ideological matrix behind British socialism, and secondly—and intimately related—the weakness of the entire left-wing political tradition incorporated into Labourism. Now, considering the organizational dimension of Labourism, we have seen another of its fundamental characteristics: Labourism is in part an organized *contradiction* between the two really vital sectors of the working-class movement, a system according to which they mutually inhibit one another instead of engaging in a genuine dialectic of growth towards socialism.

To be concluded