

LECTURE 03

THE 'NEW LEFT' AND 'ANTI-CAPITALISM'

Today I want to talk about what the *modern* Anti-Capitalist movement shares with the *New Left* that began to arise after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The modern Anti-Capitalist Movement – the movement of movements and campaigns that after 1989 and 1991 began to be identified as *the* 'anti-capitalist' movement – has much in common with the earlier movements and in order to understand the nature of the modern developments it is as well to know something of their antecedents.

However, before we can do that I must talk about the Russian Revolution – because what made the '*New Left*' *New* was its independence from the Communist Party and from the statism with which it was associated. The Russian Revolution had always *entranced* the left and the emergence of the *New Left* represented an attempt to deal with some aspects of its legacy.

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

- THE WORKING CLASS WERE IN POWER!!!!
- ENORMOUS PRESTIGE OF THE BOLSHEVIKS/CP

DECAY OF PRESTIGE

- COLLECTIVATION / WAR AGAINST THE PEASANTS
- 1937 TERROR
- MOLOTOV RIBBENTROP / PARTITION OF POLAND
- GDR 1953

- HUNGARY 1956

‘NEW LEFT’

The ‘New Left’ emerged out of this historical process of defeat and disappointment. Evidently, the Soviet model was not one that could be followed with any degree of confidence. It is true that Trotskyism, Maoism, and the Guerrilla-ism inspired by the Cuban Revolution [Che] [*Paris Match*] kept the flame of the October Revolution alive, but only in the most *ideal* or even *abstract* sense. Despite the prominence of the iconography of the October Revolution or the phraseology of Trotskyism or Maoism employed by many on the left in the sixties and seventies, in day-to-day struggles from the late fifties onwards, in both Britain and North America the ‘new left’ was engaged in discovering ways of elaborating a critique of capitalism and in attempting to mobilise people against the system in ways that owed little to the kinds of class analysis and statism upon which both the myth and the reality of the Soviet Union and the People’s Democracies were built.

REJECTION OF BIPOLARISM

The New Left despite its criticism of Sovietism rejected the Cold War analysis of what C. Wright Mills called ‘NATO intellectuals’.¹ Despite their distance from Soviet communism, from the theory of ‘dialectical materialism’ or from the organisational forms of ‘democratic-centralism’ most people on the left rejected the kind of anti-

¹ C. Wright Mills, ‘Letter to the New Left’, *New Left Review*, No. 5, September-October 1960, pp.18-23.

communism promoted by mainstream political forces in both Britain and America. Broadly speaking the new left refused to side with the 'Free world' (led by America) against the Communist world (led by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China). The left adopted a policy of giving the benefit of the doubt to America's enemies while continuing to wish that the revolutionary post-colonial societies were more democratic than they actually turned out to be.

Democratic theory must confront the problems inherent in social revolutions. For Americans concerned with the development of democratic societies, the anti-colonial movements and revolutions in the emerging nations pose serious problems [. . .] We must acknowledge that democracy and freedom do not magically occur, but have roots in historical experience; they cannot always be demanded for any society at any time, but must be nurtured and facilitated. We must avoid the arbitrary projection of Anglo-Saxon democratic forms onto different cultures. *Instead of democratic capitalism we should anticipate more or less authoritarian variants of socialism and collectivism in many emergent societies.*

But we do not abandon our critical faculties. Insofar as these regimes represent a genuine realization of national independence, and are engaged in constructing social systems which allow for personal meaning and purpose where exploitation once was, economic systems which work for the people where once they oppressed them, and political systems which allow for the organization and expression of minority opinion and dissent, we recognize their revolutionary and positive character. Americans can contribute to the growth of democracy in such societies not by moralizing, nor by indiscriminate prejudgment, *but by retaining a critical identification with these nations,* and by helping them to avoid external threats to their independence. Together with students and radicals in these nations we need to develop a reasonable theory of democracy which is concretely applicable to the cultures and conditions of hungry people. [MY EMPHASIS]²

This preparedness to 'understand' if not entirely 'accept' the authoritarian enemies of America was often legitimated by the authoritarian and brutal character of many of America's allies and client states. Furthermore, it became common to equate the authoritarianism of Stalinism and other Nationalist regimes with the intrinsic 'authoritarianism' of corporate capitalism. Capitalism and its manipulations were said

² Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society', New York: SDS, 1962, p.34.
<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/-hst306/documents/huron.html> accessed 10 October 2005.

to be '*just as bad*, if not worse' than those found in many left wing or nationalist dictatorships. A habit of equating the violence and repression inherent in much American foreign policy with that of her enemies arose – and this habit continues to this day. Many people on the left in the sixties and seventies regarded the democratic institutions and practices of advanced capitalist as *superficial* if not entirely irrelevant. This outlook enabled them, and continues to enable them, to equate the actions and policies of the major capitalist democracies with the behaviour of communist, nationalist, or religious tyrants of various other kinds.

So, the rejection of the bi-polarism of the Cold War did *not* lead most of the left into the anarchist position of saying: 'a plague on both your houses'. While the left rejected the 'free world' politics of the capitalist democracies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation it did not entirely reject leftist or nationalist tyrannies – it generally discovered reasons for *understanding* or *analysing* the extenuating circumstances in which such anti-capitalist or nationalist regimes found themselves.

Consequently, despite the North Korean invasion of South Korea, the workers' risings in the German Democratic Republic and Poland, despite the Revolution in Hungary, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Chinese crushing of Tibet, or the designs of the party dictatorship in Hanoi upon the Saigon regime, the 'new left' did not acknowledge the territorial or imperial ambitions of Stalinist or Nationalist states as *the principle problem* or the '*central contradiction*' of the international order. On the contrary, it was the movement against colonialism and against the influence of America and other big capitalist powers in emerging or newly independent countries

that united the left in opposition to imperialism. As is the case today, the problems of impoverished countries were laid firmly at the door of Western capitalist governments led by the United States. Although the crimes of Nationalists and Stalinists were readily acknowledged the *principal* enemies were the main capitalist powers led by the United States – imperialism and the capitalist system itself was to blame for poverty, division and war.

Consequently, the fight against capitalism was equated with the fight against poverty and war – and *the peace movement* itself became associated with opposition to bureaucratism, corporatism and what came to be known as the military-industrial complex. The idea arose that *capitalist* imperialism had spawned an economy - not merely dominated by the ‘militarism’ of old - but by an entirely new level of war production – a level of war production that had resulted in an economy, which was more or less dependent upon the arms industry. In fact this idea led some Marxists [like Michael Kidron] to develop the theory of the ‘permanent arms economy’ in order to analyse and explain the role of military production and investment in the major capitalist states. Thinking of this kind gave an urgency and potency to the struggle for peace, in which the struggle for peace (just like the struggle against poverty) was seen as being a central component of the struggle against capitalism. In fact because modern capitalism was said to *depend* upon poverty and war – to oppose them was automatically to be in some sense an opponent of the system.

In this way a broad alliance of liberals, moderates, social democrats, religious folk, socialists, anarchists, and revolutionaries could participate in various initiatives in

both the fight for peace and the struggle against poverty. They were united around these broadly humanistic objectives.

This broadly popular appeal, which the new left was able to promote, fitted with a new and radical concern to integrate consideration of culture into the struggle against capitalism. The long boom and rising prosperity throughout the fifties and sixties in Japan, Western Europe and North America challenged many older socialist assumptions about the inevitability of poverty and the oppression of the working class thought to be integral to capitalist relations of production. As workers and lower middle class people became much more prosperous the older kinds of socialist message targeted upon challenging poverty and unemployment at home, particularly the kind of poverty experienced between the two World Wars, began to seem irrelevant. Socialists increasingly resorted to a critique of popular culture in which advertising, cultural alienation and the meretriciousness of much popular cultural production was attacked.

Consequently, the 'hidden persuaders' in the advertising agencies were identified as being engaged in persuading people to want things, which they did not need.

Advertisers were accused of creating or manufacturing desires to suit the interests of the manufacturers and distributors of a great mass of fashion items and other inessential commodities. The older values of the 'traditional' working class rooted in tight geographical communities and concentrated in particular trades and industrial workplaces were being undermined by prosperity; grievously weakened by the emergence of new kinds of consumption. Better food, consumer durables like TVs

and refrigerators, car ownership, annual holidays, foreign travel, and the spread of white-collar non-manual occupations, were dissolving many of the older kinds of working class identification with trade unions, class politics, and socialism.

The creation of the 'New Left' was also a response by socialists to these developments. It was seen that not only would appeals to Sovietism or statism not carry much weight, but also that the days of what C. Wright Mills called 'Victorian Marxism' were numbered. The idea that the working class was the principal agent of social change – the idea upon which classical Marxism, Trotskyism, Luxemburgism and Bolshevism had been built – began to seem less and less credible. Many on the left looked for new candidates to fill the vacuum which appeared to be opening up: the peasants of the third world, the Chinese masses, the intelligentsia, the students, were all at different times called upon to carry the banner and the burden of socialist hopes – new forces would arise which would either replace the working class or supplement or join the working class as new agents of social change – social agents and social forces capable of leading the struggle against capitalism.

Along with the break-up of the socialist concentration upon the working class and class politics came the emergence of new issues to join those of desegregation, anti-colonialism and class – a new women's movement resulted in a new and bold feminism, this was joined by movements inspired by new black consciousness campaigns, gay liberation, and other minority rights. Once the centrality of class and in particular 'the working class' was questioned an entire Pandora's box of issues was opened. All those who had felt sidelined or even *oppressed* by the traditional working

class or socialist movement began to stake their claim to inclusion in the struggle against capitalism.

Despite traditional socialist or classical Marxist assertions that capitalism was entirely capable of granting more rights to women, of hiring and promoting blacks, or giving space to homosexuals, these issues gripped the imagination of many on the left. The movement away from the old left's strictly class-bound politics led the socialist movement inevitably towards issues of fighting against *social* oppression and for inclusion of those who appeared to be the victims of bourgeois or capitalist morality and economic priorities.

In the place of the central position of the working class and of class politics in much socialist thought the idea of 'the power-elite' took hold in which elites in government, military and business circles are held to dominate society – pursuing their own narrow interests – against not simply the working class – but against the whole of society and the mass of different communities and interests which it is thought make up society. So 'new left' ideas which have tended towards a revaluation of the position of the working class as an agent of social change have also tended towards different kinds of analysis in which the idea of '*the capitalist class*' or '*the ruling class*' has given ground to a conception in which relatively small immensely rich and powerful cliques and elites at the top of government, business, and the military have come to rule in an almost conspiratorial manner.

RECAP AND CONCLUDE

The New Left arose in the late fifties and the early sixties in response to the almost self-evident bankruptcy of the traditional communist opposition. Confronted, as they were by both the Cold War and by a series of vicious colonial and neo-colonial wars they opted for a policy of conditional solidarity with Stalinist and Nationalist dictatorships.

Simultaneously, they were confronted by the emergence of full-employment and widespread prosperity, which appeared to weaken the appeal of socialism amongst the working class, and undermined the classical Marxist view that the working class was the principal agent of social change.

This in turn gave much greater prominence to the role of third-world peasants, and to first-world students and intellectuals in the fight for socialism. The move beyond the central role traditionally occupied by the working class opened up numerous places in socialist thought in which black consciousness movements, feminism, gay liberation, and struggles around ethnicity could take root and grow. The socialist movement broadened out from its traditional base into a much more diffuse movement in which the movement for social solidarity and the democratisation of economic life could take a wide variety of different forms, involving a much wider range of radical social and cultural demands from those traditionally associated with socialism and the labour movement.

It is clear that what the modern anti-capitalist movement has retained from the old 'New Left' is

1. STRUGGLE AGAINST BIPOLARISM: a refusal to buy into the struggle against the 'War on Terror' which echoes the old New Left's position during the Cold War.
2. STRUGGLE FOR PEACE
3. STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM
4. STRUGGLE AGAINST ADVERTISING
5. STRUGGLE AGAINST CORPORATE AND MILITARY DOMINATION
6. STRUGGLE AGAINST POVERTY
7. STRUGGLE TO DEMOCRATISE ECONOMIC LIFE
8. STRUGGLE AGAINST A SOCIETY DOMINATED BY THE PROFIT MOTIVE AND THE MARKET

In this way the modern anti-capitalist movement can oppose capitalism *without placing class politics or the idea of the working class as the principal agent of social change* at the centre of its politics. Indeed, a more or less conspiratorial idea of manner in which 'the power-elite' is said to operate has resulted in anti-capitalist policies, programmes, and campaigns in which explicit attacks upon capitalist relations of production have given way to much more limited attacks upon big business, finance capital and other kinds of commercial monopoly.

Next week we'll begin to look at the modern movement, element by element, starting with the fight for peace.