

1956 And All That

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“I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.” Oliver Cromwell

A Brick to the Midriff

At the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, Khrushchev delivered his secret speech. In it he detailed a partial, but nevertheless lengthy, list of Stalin’s crimes, ranging from murder on the grand scale to making Mikoyan, despite his advancing years, dance the gopak. The shock wave emanating from this congress hit the World Communist movement like a well aimed brick. A further, directly connected, shock came with the Russian invasion of Hungary. British Communists were treated to the irony of discovering that the reports from Peter Fryer, the *Daily Worker* correspondent in Budapest, were being spiked in favour of uncritical pieces from J.R. Campbell in Moscow. These two world-shattering events put the CPGB into turmoil, and for the first time since the 1920s a genuine debate took place around a real issue. The leadership was closely questioned not only about the abuses in Russia but also about their own guilty knowledge of these crimes.

Rajani Palme Dutt, the Communist Party’s leading theoretician, stumped the country attempting to explain the inexplicable and justify the unjustifiable. One of his little gems, expounded at full throttle, was to suggest that, although Stalin had a few faults, we should bear in mind that even the sun – from which all life flows – has spots. This inspired allusion to solar acne was not universally well received.

In the wake of the Khrushchev revelations and after a party congress, some 7,000 members left the party. Of that number many were on their way out of politics altogether, just too tired to take on another unequal struggle. Some saw it as an opportunity to jettison the political ballast holding back their trade union careers. Others built themselves a new politics in the Labour Party, and even today a few of them adorn the Labour benches in both Houses of Parliament. There was also a minority who were not exhausted, had no career prospects to improve and were dubious

about the Labour Party. What they did have was a desire to remain communists, albeit with a small “c”. For them, the root of the problem went rather deeper than the simple formula: “the cult of the individual.” Marxism, was the general thought, can do better than that. The New Left and especially the *New Reasoner*, edited by John Saville and E.P. Thompson, provided an important forum for discussion and new thinking within a Marxist framework.

Isaac Deutscher addressed meetings of many hundreds and showed there was another tradition that differed markedly from Stalinism and was superior in every respect. Valuable though these contributions were, neither Thompson and Saville nor Deutscher were able to build an organisation. Indeed, Deutscher was a self-proclaimed tenant of that ivory tower, from which vantage point he might comment knowledgeably on the passing scene.

The few thousand ex-Communists did not form their own organisation, as had occurred in several countries abroad. If they had, one has the distinct impression, they would have been the subject of some fairly determined entrisism from several quarters.

The Reasonable Healy

There was, however, the British Trotskyist movement – small and divided, like ancient Gaul, into three parts. They were, in ascending order of size: Ted Grant’s Revolutionary Socialist League, Tony Cliff’s Socialist Review Group and Gerry Healy’s Club. Size is, of course, a relative term and between the three of them they probably organised no more than 200 to 300 members. Even so, this crisis of Stalinism was the event for which they had waited and worked for so long. The chance had arrived to build a cadre with roots in the labour movement.

At least half of the British Trotskyists were in Healy’s group and it was certainly the Club that made the only significant inroads into the disaffected Communists. Their numerical superiority was, however, of less significance than

the fact that the Club possessed a printing press and, even more significant, via the good offices of the American SWP, the plates to several key works of Trotsky. For those who had for years struggled through Stalin's clotted prose, to read Trotsky was akin to finding a clear mountain spring after a lifetime of drinking from a puddle in a livery stable. The clarity and masterly exposition of *The Revolution Betrayed* was both exciting and convincing. Much of the credit for this rubbed off on the Club, who were generous enough to supply the book. It also has to be said that the Gerry Healy of that time was not at all as unpleasant as he had been in the past, nor as repellent as he became subsequently. An altogether calmer and more tolerant chap who, if not actually allowing a hundred flowers to bloom unhindered, would permit the odd blossom a modicum of eccentric conformation. So long as Healy leant heavily on Trotsky's theoretical underpinning, the superiority of his Marxist analysis went unchallenged. Sectarianism was heavily suppressed, with not a mention of Pabloite revisionism or the crimes of the state caps that was to come later.

Among those whom the Club recruited were some very talented people. Peter Fryer, a fine journalist and outstanding expositor of Marxist theory, Brian Behan, a leading building worker and one of the best stump orators of his day, Brian Pearce, historian and translator, John Daniels, a leading educationalist, and a number of academics such as Ken Coates, Cliff Slaughter and Tom Kemp. Not only that, there was in addition a number of workers with considerable trade union and political experience. Peter Fryer edited *The Newsletter* as a lively entrust paper and John Daniels and Bob Shaw edited *Labour Review*, a theoretical journal of high quality. Even today the early issues of the magazine have a freshness that one does not usually associate with the products of the Healy stable. The new members were inducted into work in the Labour Party and an intensive education detailing the history of the movement and Trotsky's critique of Stalinism: the first four congresses of the Communist International, the Left Opposition, Germany in 1923, the General Strike, the Chinese revolution, the Third Period, fascism in Germany, Spain, etc, etc, etc. It was fascinating stuff, coherent, imbued with revolutionary spirit and conferring confidence on comrades who had been starved of genuine Marxism in the CP. One has to be grateful that this education was made available, together with the printed texts.

The South Bank Strike and its Consequences

Then, in 1958, Brian Behan obtained work as a labourer on McAlpines South Bank site. Whoever

took him on very quickly learned their mistake, a very costly mistake. Behan was fired and, despite the fact that there were a number of inexperienced and unorganised workers on the site, the shop stewards committee – which was led by Hugh Cassidy and was both experienced and resolute – called a strike. The whole organisational weight of the Club was thrown behind the dispute. Special issues of *The Newsletter* were produced and strike bulletins and leaflets rolled off the press. For the first time since the general strike of 1926, middle class revolutionaries joined the workers on the picket line. Brian Behan's brother Brendan (the playwright) appeared dispensing ten bob notes and not a few pints of Guinness. The police were much in evidence, arrests were made and, after one fracas, Brian Behan was arrested and given three months in Shepton Mallet prison.

The builders' union, the AUBTW, alarmed at the nature and background to the strike, took on the role of strike-breakers. For the Club leadership this was not just an important struggle from which the group could build a revolutionary presence in the unions, but a life and death struggle where the employers, the state, the police, the judiciary and the trade unions were hell bent not only on breaking the strike, but also on destroying the revolutionary movement. It was, in a word, Healy's own Minneapolis-St. Paul. From this small, but potentially valuable, base Healy extrapolated to a mass movement with power as a prize not too long delayed.

On the wave of enthusiasm engendered by the strike, and quite correctly in line with a policy of building bridges to the organised workers, a National Rank and File Conference was called on a programme of aggressive rank and file trade unionism, workers' control of the unions, and average wages and an end to perks for trade union officials.

The conference was well attended, by some 800 delegates, most of whom were genuine, with a good discussion and acceptance of the programme. Here was a chance for a left group to break out of sterile isolation into the workers' movement. To do so would require patience, sensitivity and an ability to transcend immediate difficulties in the interest of future gain. Unfortunately, Healy had none of these qualities. As a result of some fairly inaccurate reporting on the Club in the *News Chronicle*, and some rather more accurate reporting in the *South London Press*, Healy was panicked into ill-considered and precipitate action. Under pressure from Behan, whose prestige was high and who had always displayed a distinct apathy to the Labour Party, Healy called for the formation of the Socialist Labour League. It might have been possible to argue that the time had come for an

end to entrism, but that would have required a serious campaign of discussion and activity, testing the water both inside and outside the Labour Party. None of this was done – the group was presented with a virtual diktat. For a bigger, more sophisticated organisation it might have been possible to run an open political group and also carry out the hard slog of rank and file activity. The Club lacked these qualities and, in any case, it was about to become quite a bit smaller.

Many of the ex-CP members had required a deal of convincing of the necessity of entering the Labour Party. Now, a few brief months later, they were to ignore yesterday's orthodoxy. Aggregates were conducted in an acrimonious spirit, branch meetings degenerated into abusive slanging matches. Peter Fryer, who had been in the eye of the storm, centred on Clapham High Street, was distressed by the tantrums and uncomradely spirit and abruptly resigned and disappeared. Healy took this very hard, and old friends of Peter's, correctly assumed to be oppositional, were treated to midnight visits by Healy and two or three heavies for a "discussion" and to see if Peter was concealed in the attic. Appalled by this behaviour and opposed to the way the SLL turn had been thrust on the organisation, a faction was formed. The Stamford faction (so named after the grounds of stately home at which the first meeting was held) had about 25 members, among them Peter Fryer, John Daniels, Edward Thompson, Ken Coates and Peter Cadogan. Also among the 25 was the obligatory spy to keep Healy abreast of developments. A document, "The 1959 Situation in the SLL", was produced, which Cadogan – who acted as faction secretary – for reasons known only to himself advertised in *Tribune*. In short order, Healy's tame solicitor was issuing writs for libel against the signatories. Expulsion followed the writs with some speed. Not long afterwards, Behan and his co-thinkers, now characterised as ultra-left, were expelled. In the space of a couple of years, Healy had recruited, alienated and expelled practically all of the 1956 levy. Nearly all of them were lost to revolutionary politics. What Stalin could not accomplish, Healy managed in record time.

Building the Party by Expulsions

Only a handful of that levy remained, perhaps the most notable being Cliff Slaughter, who carried on for another 25 years providing a small intellectual fig leaf for Healy. How he, and some others, supped so long with such short spoons at Healy's table I have not yet seen satisfactorily explained. Perhaps, like Alasdair MacIntyre, they have made their peace with God.

The destruction of that particular cadre was

just one episode – and probably the most important – in a continuing process of finding a likely area for recruitment, performing Herculean tasks of organisation, followed by draconian measures of discipline and expulsion. It seemed that, as soon as the group began to grow to the point where it could not be controlled by Gerry Healy leaping aboard his "Riffi-type Citroën" (the description is Brian Behan's) and nipping round the country suppressing dissent, the group needed to be reduced to manageable proportions. In this way a legion of ex-Trotskyists was created. Indeed, if one were inclined to conspiracy theory, one might hazard that all along Healy had been in the pay of the Mikado, the Axis, the State Department and the Deuxième Bureau.

How, one might ask, could one man, aided by a few Satraps, manage for so long to maintain this kind of regime? From the outside it is almost impossible to answer such a question. Suffice it to say, the very fact of membership implies a belief that this is the revolutionary party, if only in embryo. Whatever the immediate discontents, there is general agreement on the politics, in essence Trotsky's politics. Given this, the critic is already half disarmed.

The Socratic dialogue goes thus:

Q. What vehicle will enable the working class to build socialism?

A. A revolutionary party.

Q. Is the Club/SLL/WRP the revolutionary party?

A. Yes, otherwise I would not be having this discussion.

Q. As the revolutionary organisation, does not the Club/SLL/WRP represent the objective interests of the working class?

A. Er ... yes.

Q. If the Club/SLL/WRP represents the objective needs of the workers, then your opposition must be based on alien class forces, with all this implies for your continued membership.

As Tommy Cooper used to say: "Get out of that."

There is, however, life after expulsion, and with a little time to reflect one becomes aware that the Club/SLL/WRP is not a revolutionary party of any kind and that the class must look elsewhere for its objective needs to be serviced. The truth is that with the steady erosion of the cadre, any opportunity to become active in a genuinely working class milieu is made impossible. The mutual interaction between the Marxist organisation and advanced workers is the only guarantee of an unfolding programme and a growing party. Trotskyism is not the last word, it is a stepping stone to a higher synthesis.

Since Trotsky's exile in 1928, the movement's

relationship with any significant group of workers has been episodic and peripheral. Given the circumstances, this may have been inevitable, but this enforced isolation has given rise to some very strange organisational forms and even more eccentric practices. To recruit, given something coherent and different to say, is not impossible, so long as it is worked at hard and steadily. To retain and to utilise that recruitment is something that the movement has signally failed to do. The fault may lay in ourselves not the stars.

For fifty years Healy strove to build a group in his own image and today it is shattered into half a dozen tiny fragments. Any worker with a passing knowledge of the history of Healyism would have been half-witted to see any of this as a vehicle for socialism. Inevitably, in an account like this, the name of Gerry Healy looms large. Nevertheless, we can take comfort from the fact that neither Healy nor his less talented clones represent the essence of the Trotskyist movement. Clique politics operate on idiosyncratic rules, in a land when psychology provides more answers than class analysis. Certainly, before any reasonable tribunal, Healy could seek refuge behind the McNaughton rules. When you think about it, there are suburban tennis clubs with their share of megalomaniac officials.

Do We Need So Many "Vanguards"?

Of greater concern is the fact that, at a time when Stalinism has collapsed, there are more Trotskyist groups than ever before. Practically all of them fall neatly under Marx's definition of a sect, in that they take as their point of honour that shibboleth that separates them from the movement. There is no organisation that is immaculately constructed, no matter how ideologically correct, because ideology is not a fixed or finished category. It follows from this that an aggregation of like-

minded sects, masquerading as an International, with a capital "I", cannot substitute for the pathetic inadequacy of its sections. This form of substitutionism leads to disillusion, intrigue, factionalism and further splits, elevating irrelevance to a global scale.

An organisation of tens, a few hundred, or even a few thousands will not succeed unless it gets rid of the dross that has accumulated over the years. It is particularly distressing, for example, that the great rift between defencists and state caps should still generate so much heat. For my part I agree with the sentiments expressed by Ken Tarbuck in a recent letter: "I came to the conclusion that none of the theories were adequate, their main merits were in showing the deficiencies of the opposing views without really taking one forward." Neither theory has stood the test of real life (incidentally, by the same yardstick, bureaucratic collectivism also looks pretty motheaten). It would be nice if there could be a self-denying ordinance, restricting discussion on the class nature of Outer Mongolia to the pub, after the serious business of the meeting had been concluded. Stalinism is gone, capitalism is in crisis and there are distinct signs of a renewal of working class struggle, and printing technology is more accessible than ever before (which is one reason why there are so many small groups with their own little journals).

This happy conjunction of circumstances cries out for a united revolutionary organisation, committed to work in and around the class, and equally committed to learn from experience. None of us has all the answers and, when all is said and done, we have nothing to lose but our sectarian chains and a world to win.

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