

L'Affaire Djilas

R. H. S. Crossman: **STANDING MARX ON HIS HEAD**

IMPORTANT books about politics are normally written not by important politicians, but by minor participants or, even more frequently, by observers on the sidelines. Milovan Djilas' *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (Thames and Hudson, 21s.) is an exception to this norm. Here is a treatise on Communism which may well prove as epoch-making as John Locke's treatise *Of Civil Government*. Yet it is written (and it gains from being written) by one of the outstanding leaders of Yugoslav Communism.

The American publishers compared Milovan Djilas with Karl Marx, and called his book "*the Anti-Communist Manifesto*." I am glad this comparison has been removed from the British dust-cover, since it is both unfair to Djilas and misleading to the prospective reader. Nothing could be less like a manifesto than these abstruse, elliptical reflections on the nature of Communism. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx was vulgarising his theories and proclaiming to the outside world the articles of his Communist creed: in *The New Class* Djilas has composed an esoteric work, a Marxist polemic against Communism. I fear it will be largely unintelligible except to those who have been thoroughly grounded in Communist methodology. Indeed, the reader must well enough acquainted with international Marxist jargon to extract what Djilas means from a semi-literate translation.

Who is responsible for this translation? The publishers only express their gratitude to Messrs. Morton Puner and Konrad Kellen for "editorial assistance"; but I gather that Djilas wrote in Serbo-Croat and these two Ameri-

cans are entirely responsible for the English version. From what I know of Djilas' literary background, I cannot believe that his original text deserved the treatment Messrs. Puner and Kellen gave it. Here is a not uncharacteristic paragraph of their "translationese"!

"Numerous features which distinguish contemporary Communism from other movements in the use of methods can be found. These features are predominantly quantitative or are actuated by varied historical conditions and by the aims of Communists."

Mr. Djilas himself, however, must take the main responsibility for the obscurity and incoherence of his book. No doubt the conditions under which it was written explain a lot. If he had had access to Western libraries, and if he had had the opportunity to test generalisations based on his personal experience against a wider experience, he would probably have filled in many of the gaps in his argument and removed some of its minor inconsistencies. However that may be, this English version is a book which an examiner on either side of the Iron Curtain would have to reject if it were submitted as a thesis for a doctorate of philosophy. It is, in fact, a bad book: repetitious—despite its brevity—and full of contradictions.

Nevertheless, like Locke's *Of Civil Government*, it is one of those bad books which may well become a classic. If Djilas is deeply self-contradictory in his main argument, it is because he is grappling with real contradictions. If he is incoherent, it is because he is trying to formulate new ideas in an old terminology and to transcend Communism while his thought still runs in the categories of the dialectic. Indeed, the fact that this is a

crabbed Marxist analysis, written from right inside the Communist camp, is its chief value. If Djilas' conclusions had been reached by a British, a French, or an American politician, they would not have been worth putting down on paper. If his arguments had been developed by an exile from the Communist world, who had learnt to think in Western democratic categories, they would only be interesting as an example of successful adaptation to environment. The importance of *The New Class* lies precisely in the fact that it is a refutation of Marxist-Leninism, composed within the categories of Marxist-Leninism.

FOR the convenience of non-Marxist readers, it may be useful at this point if I try to present Mr. Djilas' argument in summary form, translating it, where possible, into plain English.

(1) Communism is the only ideology under which the proletariat of underdeveloped countries can carry out the revolution required to liberate them from imperialist exploitation. Once this exploitation has ended by a successful revolution, the only historical function of the Communists is to industrialise their countries.

(2) In contrast with the strong working-class movements of the West, which prefer anti-dogmatic, reformist ideologies, the working class in backward countries was compelled by its weakness to accept the exclusive and dogmatic ideology of Communism. A totalitarian ideology, in fact, is the precondition for revolution in a backward country, just as totalitarianism is the pre-condition for the rapid industrial transformation of a backward economy.

(3) During the struggle for power, the Communists sincerely believe in their ideals and aspire to put them into practice. The Communist Party becomes "an indestructible family, incomprehensible and impenetrable to others, inflexible in the solidarity and identity of its reactions, thoughts, and feelings . . . , irresistible to its followers and to many others, powerful because it is fused into one piece, one soul, and one body."

(4) Directly power is achieved, degenera-

tion is inevitable. "The wonderful human characteristics of an isolated movement are slowly transformed into the intolerant and Pharisaical morals of a privileged caste. . . . Exclusive caste spirit and complete lack of political principles and virtues become conditions for the power and maintenance of the movement." This decay is the inevitable result of the exclusive, dogmatic ideology required for a successful revolution.

(5) The ideological unity which the Communist Party makes obligatory on its members leads inevitably to personal dictatorship. Every Communist State goes through three phases. Declining from the revolutionary phase—linked in Russia with the personality of Lenin, through the dogmatic phase—linked with Stalin—to the pragmatic phase—linked with a collective leadership.

(6) Every Communist State is owned and exploited by the New Class. This New Class is not the same as the Party, but develops out of it. "The party makes the class; but the class grows stronger while the party grows weaker." It consists of "the Communist political bureaucracy, which uses, enjoys, and disposes of nationalised property. . . . Having achieved industrialisation, the New Class can only strengthen its position and pillage the people."

(7) The Communist revolution is "the first revolution to be carried out to the advantage of the revolutionaries." Because the Communists are unable to accomplish what they believe in, their actions inevitably contradict their principles. They can never acknowledge this, and have to pretend that they are achieving Socialism when they are in fact subjecting the people to exploitation more ruthless than under any previous régime.

(8) The Communist system would be rightly described as State Capitalism if the State ran the economy. But in fact the State is used by the Communist class as an instrument of exploitation. This is why a change to State Capitalism would be a mark of progress from the present dictatorship of the New Class.

(9) This dictatorship carries the seeds of its own destruction. "While bringing about the

most complete despotism, Communist revolution has also created the basis for the abolition of despotism. . . . This is because industrialisation, which first made Communism inevitable, will finally make the Communist form of government and ownership superfluous." The overthrow of the Communist dictatorship will come through divisions first among the members of the new class and then between the various Communist countries. Both Collective Leadership and National Communism are "characteristics of Communism in decline."

(10) This decline is hastened when members of the new class perceive the contradiction between the theory of the classless society and the practice of their class dictatorship. "The battle for its own existence will drive the new class itself or individual fractions of it to renounce the current means it is using or to renounce the idea that its goals are realisable." At this point, the establishment of a military dictatorship would be a sign of progress.

I cannot pretend that this arid and abstract dialectic is attractive. It is, however, enlivened by a number of shrewd insights. Here are some examples.

"Most of the illegal organisations in Communist régimes are created by the secret police in order to lure opponents into them and put them in a position where the police can settle accounts. The Communist government does not discourage objectionable citizens from committing crimes. In fact it prods them into such crimes."

"Communist leaders really believe that they know economic laws and that they can administer production with scientific accuracy. The truth is that the only thing they know is how to seize control of the economy."

"Under Communism thefts and misappropriations are inevitable. It is not just poverty that motivates people to steal the 'national property' but the fact that the property does not seem to belong to anyone."

"Lenin was broadly right when he stated that politics is 'concentrated economy.' But this has been reversed in the Communist system. There, economy has become concentrated politics."

IF MARX stood Hegel on his head, Djilas has done the same to Marx. He has

worked out a dialectical argument to prove that, instead of introducing a classless society, a Communist revolution must inevitably lead to the dictatorship of the New Class. Moreover, he demonstrates that this period of exploitation by the Communists is as inevitable a phase in the development of a backward Eastern country as monopoly capitalism and imperialism were in that of the West.

I must admit that this "dialectical" refutation of Communism is as unconvincing to me as the dogma itself. Why, for instance, with the example of India before me, should I assume that a Communist revolution *must* be the precondition of industrialisation in a backward country? Why should I take for granted that a revolutionary leadership, in order to obtain the devotion of its followers, *must* make them accept an exclusive, dogmatic ideology? The truth is that Djilas is here guilty of the chief error he ascribes to Communist ideology. In his whole account of the Communist revolution and the emergence of the New Class, he is as mechanically determinist as his Stalinist opponents. "In history," he writes, "it is not important who implements a process. It is only important that the process be implemented. Such was the case in Russia and other countries in which Communist revolutions took place. The revolution created forces, leaders, organisations, and ideas which were necessary to it."

The worst of this kind of mechanical determinism is that it gives those who preach it the impression that they are announcing scientific laws, when all they are in fact doing is to describe their own experience and then generalise it into a dogma. When Djilas describes the Communist revolution as the "inescapable necessity" of a backward country in need of industrialisation, all he really means is that Yugoslavia, Russia, and China—the only places where Communist parties achieved a revolution—were all undeveloped countries. When he asserts that a revolutionary party *must* have a dogmatic ideology, and links this inevitability with the noble ethics of a freedom fighter, he is generalising his own experience with the Yugoslav partisans—

just as his dogma that Communists are inevitably corrupted by power derives very obviously from his own bitter experience in Moscow and Belgrade since 1945.

When we analyse his central concept of the New Class, we find that he is guilty of another characteristically Marxist fallacy. Claiming to use the word "class" in the strict Marxist sense, he asserts that his New Class "owns and controls nationalised production." Yet, as we read on, this strict definition is blurred. Djilas admits that the New Class is not a social class when he observes that, under Stalin as under Napoleon, there was a "career open to the talents." "Nowhere at any time has the road been as wide open to the devoted and loyal as it is in the Communist system." A little later we find him admitting that the New Class is not strictly an economic class, since membership of it is not identical with the ownership of property. Finally, he concludes, "To be an owner or a joint owner in the Communist system means that one enters the ranks of the ruling political bureaucracy, and nothing else." (!) In fact, the New Class is only a Marxist metaphor, not a reality. Yet, if Djilas were to admit that what he is describing is a ruling clique and not a new Marxist class, the main pillar of his dialectical refutation of Communism would come tumbling down.

Djilas sees the Western world as the dialectical antithesis of the Communist system; and, just as he asserted that revolution is inevitable in a backward country, so he asserts the inevitability of reformism in the West. One dogma has as little justification as the other. If proletarian revolution was inevitable and desirable in Yugoslavia, why is it impossible and undesirable in Italy? If reformism is practicable in the West, why is it excluded outside Europe? In a characteristic passage, Djilas discusses the revolutionary changes caused by modern warfare: "These invisible military and economic revolutions are of enormous extent and significance. They are more spontaneous than revolutions achieved by force; that is, they are not burdened to as great an extent with ideological and organisational elements. Therefore such

revolutions make it possible to register in a more orderly way the tendencies of movements in the modern world." Translated from Marxist jargon into plain English, this passage is an admission that a violent revolution, carried out by a political party, as in Yugoslavia, is "less spontaneous" (a less faithful expression of the popular will to freedom) than the peaceful economic evolution achieved under Western democratic institutions.

What a violent method of thinking this dialectic is! It compels the Marxist to distort his picture of historical evolution, first by vulgarising all change into a conflict of extremes and then by hailing whatever emerges from this conflict as a new synthesis. Djilas' discovery, for instance, that the rulers of the Communist world are dictators and exploiters of their subject peoples leads him automatically to jump to the conclusion that the non-Communist world must be a liberal antithesis to it. The cold war, we are told, is a struggle between positive and negative forces, and the unification of the world community "will be effected through the opposition of these systems." In this process the Communist system will always remain the main obstacle to unity, because here the State is merely an instrument of exploitation, whereas in Britain and America the State has become a factor on the side of unity. The Americans, Djilas observes, are "carrying out nationalisation on an even vaster scale, not by changing the form of ownership but by putting a considerable portion of the national income into the hands of the Government." So America, according to Djilas, is revealed as the really Socialist State, and the classless society will be finally achieved when—the backward countries having been duly industrialised—the Communist dictatorships are superseded by Western-type democratic governments, which do not own the national economy, as the New Class owns it, but administer it under the control of an elected Parliament.

I MUST say that I enjoy watching Marx stood on his head, but the doctrine which results from this procedure will scarcely

stimulate liberalism in the Western world. Indeed, I am afraid that the chief effect of *The New Class* on those people who are likely to read it most eagerly and praise it most highly will be to increase their intellectual complacency and political conservatism. Nor will it have much value for Western Social Democrats, since very few of us accept the validity of Marxist dialectic. Where it should be read and analysed line by line is in the Communist countries. It is, indeed, a sobering thought that, among a great majority of the human race to-day, the Communist dialectic is accepted as the only valid method of thinking about politics. Even outside the Communist countries, a large part of the intelligentsia in Asia and Africa are at least half inclined to accept it.

The importance of *The New Class* is that it provides for this intelligentsia of the Communist and of the uncommitted world not merely a Marxist critique of Communism (that has often been done before) but a Marxist "treatise of Civil Government." No wonder the book is difficult, inconsistent, in-

coherent! Indeed, to understand it fully the reader must actually participate in the tortuous escape of a Communist mind from the Communist prison in which it has been confined, and share with that mind its agonising inability to describe in the categories of the prison-house—the only categories it knows—the freedom it now enjoys. Will *The New Class* be permitted to reach the readers at which it is aimed? In the non-committed countries there will be no difficulty. But Djilas knows better than anyone else that Khrushchev's anti-Stalinism and Tito's National Communism do not connote any real liberalisation, but are merely defensive mechanisms, employed by the New Class as a result of their new insecurity. Ironically enough, those Communists in Yugoslavia and Poland who are struggling most eagerly to escape out of Stalinism are least likely to be permitted the access to this book. They might disagree with it violently, but they would, I think, have to admit that its author beckons them from ahead along the road they have chosen.

Morgan Phillips: THE REBEL AND THE PRISONER

WHEN I first met Milovan Djilas in Belgrade in 1950 I took it as a matter of course that our discussions would follow the same formal, guarded character that seemed to be the standard adopted in all Communist dictatorships at that time. At first there were the familiar assurances to my colleagues of the Labour Party deputation that we were free to ask any questions we liked and to discuss any matter we chose. For the sake of amity, we resisted the temptation to point out that we were more interested in the candid answers than in the careful questions we had prepared. And indeed, our prudence was well rewarded, for I was never more surprised in my life at the staggering critical frankness of

this Communist statesman, who for three years had been plugging the orthodox Stalin line.

This was only a short time after Yugoslavia's break with the Cominform, but Tito's rejoinder to Stalin's denunciations had been, up to that time, so restrained that it seemed that a reconciliation was still not out of the question. Djilas, however, destroyed that illusion completely. Not only did he hit ruthlessly at the sacred Russian "centralism," but his obvious enthusiasm for the importation of a more truly democratic system into his own country helped to clear a little of the extraordinary mystery which surrounded the dramatic quarrel between two great Communist leaders.