

# The Real Threat to the Realm

## *A Cambridge Student Replies to Stephen Haseler—By ROBERT SILVER*

IT IS ALWAYS TEMPTING to elevate distinctions of degree into distinctions of kind. Motives for doing this are not necessarily intellectually dishonest. Most of us have a suppressed desire to make the search for an exact description of events a more romantic affair than it really is.

Dr Stephen Haseler has given way to the inner urge ("Can British Socialism Survive?", ENCOUNTER, December 1976). He creates a superb dramatisation of history. We are in a world of great ideological conflicts between Revisionism and Labourism, between Utopian and Marxism. It is a world filled with decisive moments—the failure of Hugh Gaitskell to banish Clause Four from the Labour Party constitution; the imminent expulsion of Reg Prentice from his seat at Newham; the invitations extended by the Labour movement to a bogus trade-union leader and a ruthless police-chief from the Soviet Union.

It is a version of the recent past that commands intense excitement. Skilful selection of facts can make out the differences over how much nationalisation or how much public expenditure to be more elemental than they are. Great events—under this pictorialisation of history—have great consequences; thus Dr Haseler's implication that the power of the Left in the Labour Party was given drastic momentum by a Social Democratic "failure of nerve" over Clause Four. Unfortunately the British Left has never been able to handle properly great dramatic events; instead of seeing them in the cool light of morning, they read the newspaper headlines and romanticise them into a melodrama. Dr Haseler—on the opposite wing of the Left from the Tribune Group—falls into the same trap. He envisages a future cast over with dark shadows. If Britain is not to become a People's Democracy by the early 1980s, he writes, "then some sort of conflict between Marxists and democrats is probably inevitable." We shall soon find out.

Dr Haseler has in mind, I think, a conflict that diverges from what has gone before. In a

sense we have had a continuing 50-year-old conflict in this country between democrats and a group of extremists who call themselves Marxists and who believe in revolution. It has been a grimy and fragmented struggle. It has taken different forms at different times: parliamentary elections; court cases over trade-union ballot rigging; violent strike picketing; occasional street-fighting; trials of the agents of an unnamed power for espionage. It is not this mélange of skirmishes that he appears to prophesy for the future. He wants a fight-out over fundamentals. If not, then catastrophe. Little did the sober men of 1689 realise that their constitutional régime would last for two hundred and eighty-eight years before it was threatened with this imminent conclusion.

IT IS A THESIS in need of a conspiracy. It is possible—though highly unlikely—that "Marxism" will arrive quite unexpected through the contradictions of capitalism. It might be that economic forces beyond our control will take over.<sup>1</sup> I do not think that Dr Haseler has this in mind. His relegation of economics to a subordinate position in the explanation of our present plight tends to militate against this interpretation. Revolutions do sometimes occur without revolutionaries—the revolution in industrial societies that brings the USA and the USSR closer together in the technological bureaucracies that they embody. But it is not this sort of revolution that he fears. He fears a revolution of the classic kind. It might be a subtle ideological *coup d'état* or a palace game of musical chairs, rather than a full-blooded mutiny from below. But it is none the less a revolution that requires people to implement it out of their conscious wills. Countries do not arrive at police states by accident.

It has need of an adequate conspiracy theory because it is not immediately apparent that

<sup>1</sup> Presumably those who follow the Marxist theory of history wish things to get worse, to intensify those "contradictions"—and those who advocate high welfare spending or unemployment benefits are just providing palliatives which obstruct that process. Wouldn't a large defence budget be the best Marxist Policy? Wouldn't it take money away from private capitalist investment without spending it on social palliatives?

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juvenile insurrectionists, trade-union bureaucrats, and hesitant parliamentary rebels—the real human stuff of which the British revolution is to be made—have a great deal in common. In the chess-game of “scenarios” all three elements, from the present state of Britain, would seem to be necessary. The insurrectionists, to give it the necessary dynamic; the trade-union leaders, to call on the massed armies of the proletariat; the parliamentarians, to present the attack on democracy with a vital front of respectability.

AS IT HAPPENS there has not been a single instance of a successful internal revolution from the Left in an advanced industrial society over the last hundred years. For an elucidating example of what could happen it is necessary to turn to the Nazi take-over in Germany; in which these three qualities—the youthful momentum of the Brown-shirts, the mass drawing-power of Hitler’s rhetoric, and the façade of constitutional legality—were effectively reconciled. But—one asks—where is the point of unity among the divergent forces in Britain?

Dr Haseler—like many others—uses the convenient covering term “Marxist” to denote the opponents of democracy from the Left. It is a thesis that has to be argued with the utmost dexterity. It requires a subtle sleight-of-hand. It requires the word “Marxist” to be used, at one moment, to describe those who believe in violent revolution and, at another, to designate those who are committed to the public ownership of the “commanding heights” of the means-of-production. There is, of course, an overlap—but the overlap is not large enough to be a plausible threat. The first use of the word is precise but does not draw the net widely enough; the second draws the net widely but provides no obvious danger to the continuance of our democracy. The Left have no particular reason to be satisfied with the old Herbert Morrison ideal of the centralised public corporation. Tony Benn especially advocates a policy which will try to combine public ownership with an effective wider democracy. The old principles of traditional socialism—nationalisation plus working-class power—are in direct contradiction. It is realised on the Left that they are in direct contradiction. Hasn’t the new synthesis more in common with Syndicalism than with Marxist-Leninism? It is the workers’ collective of Meriden, not the public corporation like the BBC, that furnishes the dream for the future.

WHAT COULD BRING the potential revolutionaries together? (1) It could be Moscow gold. As yet, no convincing evidence has been submitted. (Mr Ian Mikardo’s trading activities in Eastern Europe have long since been forgotten.) (2) It

could be the power-base of some fringe political party. At the moment there are six such parties and each claims to be the true heir of Karl Marx: the International Socialists; the International Marxist Group; the Socialist Party of Great Britain; the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist); the Communist Party; and the Workers’ Revolutionary Party. They fight each other with fratricidal intensity. Could this be a stunt of huge proportions to disguise real comradeship? This is doubtful. (3) It could be the central organisation of the Tribune Group. Yet there does not seem to be much central organisation in the Tribune Group. There was a deep divide over whom to vote for in the recent Labour Party leadership elections—Michael Foot (who proclaimed his disinterest in victory) or Tony Benn (who has never been a member of the Group). Moreover, the Tribune Group at least officially lacks an extra-Parliamentary wing—it does not even have the association with some other national organisation that the moderates’ Manifesto Group has with the Social Democratic Alliance.

REVOLUTIONS ARE violent affairs. The initial stages may be put through on the sly, but ultimately force is needed to maintain the *fait accompli*. Does the average British Marxist—the Marxist on the Clapham omnibus—have a gun in his garret? It would be interesting to know. Evidence is surely required of an Underground Red mafia, ready to use its weapons at a moment’s command. Who is to provide the back-up strength? A defecting Sir Robert Mark? Jack Jones’ old veterans of the International Brigade? Some strange fraternity of undergraduate Officers’ Training Corps and the Militant cadres? Brigadier Kitson?

Dr Haseler appears to see the point of unity in the way that the members of the divergent groups are linked together by “the grip which Left totalitarian ideology impresses on their minds.” He makes the error of supposing that a ruthless political theory, precisely by virtue of its ruthlessness, exerts a cohesive effect on its adherents. It is a curiously historicist way of looking at things. Men are bound from outside by “vast impersonal forces.” Ruthlessness far from being just a necessary means—though regrettable—turns into an attractive end. The ideology with which the men of the Left are supposed to comfort themselves is not the milk of human kindness that we have been led to believe; it is not the docile principles of Equality and Fraternity that many argue are deceptively innocuous. Dr Haseler, on the contrary, argues that they confirm their commitment by a frank admission to them-

selves of their own totalitarianism. They will advance to the barricades under the banner of the new commissar state. Dr Haseler's analysis of human motivation at least has the virtue of striking eccentricity.

He massively overrates the influence of ideology on British political behaviour. The Labour Party does not gain the support of its members from their assent to a series of propositional statements. That support originates in a whole network of obscure reasons—loyalties and connections that derive from class, family, locality, religion. There is little evidence that the Left of the party acts in the light of long-term manipulative purposes. It is chained to the totemism of personalities—from Keir Hardie to Nye Bevan—not the doctrine of historical materialism. It sees the past in terms of moral drama—the “treachery” of Ramsay MacDonald, the entry into its “inheritance” of 1945—not sociological law. Its actions reflect the traditional outlook of British radicalism, not the “specious metaphysics” of Marxism. The Tribune Group oppose public spending cuts—as Clem Attlee, or Oswald Mosley, or a host of others did in 1929–31. They propose import controls on manufactured commodities, as an attractive alternative to policies of greater economic harshness—as Joe Chamberlain did at the turn of the century. They denounce the military coup in Chile as Orwell denounced it in Spain. They campaigned against entry into the Common Market either as nationalists (just as Norman Angell campaigned against the secret continental diplomacy of Sir Edward Grey before the First World War) or because they feared high food prices (like John Bright when he fought the Corn Laws). They see defence expenditure as an obvious target at a time of budgetary restraint (as Gladstone did when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer). In fact, on a whole series of issues the responses of the Tribune Group—reactionary, short-sighted, naive, or chauvinist as they may have been—were and are traditional radical responses.

IT IS HARMFUL IF partisan differences—routine to the nature of a democracy—become constant debates about constitutional premises. Social Democrats should not make their objections to proposals from the Left—objections that rest on economic exigency or administrative undesirability—into charges of disrupting parliamentary democracy. It is possible to nationalise banks without nationalising political parties or newspapers as the example of France shows. It is possible to run Incomes Policies—voluntary or compulsory—by agreement between government and trade unions, without producing a corporatist state—as this country seems to be demonstrating

(unless a corporatist state is defined as agreement between Government and the Trade Unions). It is even possible to have budgetary deficits and large-scale inflation—to have them on the grounds that they are preferable to other evils—without destroying parliamentary democracy (as the example of Israel indicates).

THE OUTSTANDING FEATURE of British society at the moment is not its standardised authoritarianism, but its pluralist variety. It is a country where strikes are induced less by conspiratorial Marxists than by wildcat anarchists. The outstanding feature of our state at the moment is not the concerted effort with which it attacks our freedom, but the rambling incoherence of its competing syndicates. It is a state where the Electricity Board competes with the Gas Board for customers; where local government refuses to carry out central government instructions to cut spending; where many Cabinet Ministers are paid to represent not the public interest but in effect sectional pressure groups (Scotland, Wales, Defence, Agriculture).

We are not in a situation of incipient absolutism. It is a state which lacks a governing intelligence—and has done so under different party administrations; the myth of the governing

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intelligence is, to borrow Koestler's phrase, a ghost in the machine.

It may even be that a little more absolutism is necessary to direct the pluralist variety into coordinated motion; just as a little more Marxist sociology on the Left of the Labour Party might counteract the incursions of romantic sentiment.

Of course, the friends of liberty must be perpetually vigilant—but not to the degree that they die of insomnia on night-duty. The chief danger of Dr Haseler's views is not that they will induce a witch-hunt. It is that they will provide a distraction which paralyses our capacity for necessary action where it matters. The real threat is not that in five or ten years' time the blood will flow in the streets or that the Reds—or the thugs—or the generals—will have taken over. The real threat is that we will be stagnant, exhausted, and lifeless. The blood is unlikely to flow in the streets; but it may clot in our veins.

## Euro-Communist Ideology

# Worrying about Stalinism



IT USED TO BE SAID that "Left could speak to Left"; but the lines of communication between Paris and Moscow have been running into a lot of static recently. Just the other day Soviet spokesmen, in a sharp if somewhat indirect propaganda offensive, ticked off the French Communist Party. The Moscow weekly *New*

*Times* published a long article dealing with the history of the Communist Party as recorded in a new book by an official French Communist historian, Jean Elleinstein.

Elleinstein is, of course, a member of the Party, and its Director of Marxist Studies and Research. But he has already raised ideological eyebrows with his previous publications: a 4-volume *History of the USSR* and works entitled *The Stalinist Phenomenon* and *Thoughts about Stalinism*. As in his earlier writings M. Elleinstein tries in his

history of the Party to confront certain "barbarous" realities about the epoch of Joseph Stalin as hero of world-communism. In one passage he observes:

"... We want neither the Gulag Archipelago nor the prohibition of Art Exhibitions, neither a censorship of works of literature nor psychiatric clinics for political prisoners or persecution of Christians and Jews. We are prepared to condemn these phenomena with the same firmness as everybody else, although we do not reduce the whole of the reality of socialism in the East to these specific situations. . . ."

As a Marxist historian of Communism he argues that the Party leadership was excessively oriented to the Soviet Union. That is why, for example, the French Communists tended to dismiss ideals like Freedom and Democracy as "bourgeois conceptions." Perhaps this was understandable in the historic context of the Soviet Union where, after all, no libertarian tradition had existed. Even Lenin, as Elleinstein tries to prove, never pinned any hopes on a genuinely democratic development in Russia. But for France, with such a different national political tradition, this was unacceptable.

Such notions, for Soviet orthodox defenders so alert to "provocation", were very irritating in Moscow. Yury Sedov in *New Times* was annoyed at this attempt to confront "the notorious anti-Soviet slanders of the bourgeois ideologists." As usual, it is no accident, comrades, that such old chestnuts like "no democracy", "no freedom", and "the suppression of all those who think differently" keep on coming up in Elleinstein's work. Enough said: for a Soviet critic doesn't ever argue about such matters: he is a polemicist, and he simply attacks. But, of course, in this affair he is not simply attacking another somewhat mistaken individual author on historical subjects. Elleinstein's Party is in the midst of its new turn to the national traditions of just such "Freedom and Democracy", of a socialism which is draped in the French *tricolore*; and even if it shows signs of worrying about how far certain of its revisionist Marxist theoreticians can go, it must feel that here the Moscow polemic was really directed against the French Party leadership.

THE EDITORS OF *l'Humanité* are not exactly insensitive on such matters. But they have their special esoteric ways of dealing with such issues: that is to say, talk about the "form" of the problem, but not its "content." They took umbrage only at the *form* of the criticism from Russia. Why should criticism of fraternal parties be quickly interpreted as an insidious act of "anti-Communism"? If Moscow was bitter and hostile, Paris would remain polite and friendly. There are, I suspect, good reasons for this, not