Chapter Twelve

Communism and British Intellectuals

A Review of Neal Wood, Communism and British Intellectuals

Disillusionment with revolutionary politics has been a theme among British intellectuals ever since Wordsworth. Since 1917 autobiographical accounts of disenchantment with Marxism have multiplied until we have all come to believe that the history of British intellectuals between 1929 and 1956 was a kind of rake’s political progress; generous young minds moved by prewar unemployment and fascism were drawn into the nefarious revolutionary clutches of the Communist Party and imprisoned there until some particularly repulsive deed of Bolshevism brought them back to the clear light of liberalism. In the thirties, British intellectuals were concerned which class owned the means of production; in the fifties what mattered to them was which class put the tea in before the milk and vice-versa.

Like all good mythology, this piece of folk-lore contains a large element of truth. But it contains some error and distortion too. Fortunately a number of studies of the history of the British Communist Party have recently been published which makes it possible to sift out the truth and the error. One is Doctor

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1 Originally broadcast on the BBC Third Programme and published in *The Listener*, 7 January 1960, pp. 21, 23.
Neal Wood’s *Communism and the British Intellectuals*. 2 From this one can draw some striking conclusions about the role of the Communist Party in British political life. The most important of these is that, for the last thirty years, the Communist Party has been an essentially conservative force.

**Ritualised pseudo-conflict**

Anthropologists have familiarised us with the idea that what looks like conflict in a society may not really be so. Where there are possibilities of destructive struggle, the risk of destroying the established order may be avoided by providing outlets in the form of ritualised pseudo-conflicts. The motions of conflict are gone through and by doing this the tensions are relieved and the real conflict is avoided. This happens in some African tribal societies and it has sometimes been thought to be the function of British parliamentary life. But the imitation of conflict can be effective only if the imitation is plausible and if it secures the belief of the actors who have to carry it through. The life of Parliament obviously fails to meet this criterion. Yet, if the larger political parties have ceased to head off and tame down the young disruptive radicals, they have hardly had cause for anxiety. The Communist Party has done the job for them. Radical militancy has swept into the Party and by it been diverted, dissipated, and finally disillusioned.

This contention will be so new to most people that it will inevitably meet with strong resistance; not just from present supporters of the Communist Party, but from all those defenders of Western civilisation for whom the Communist Party has been the chief target, not to mention all the memoir writers who cherish a secret nostalgia for what they like to think of as their red revolutionary days. So the tale must be carefully told. And the first thing to be said is that it was not always so. The founders of the Communist Party were authentic Marxists and revolutionaries, almost all of then industrial workers, held back by the sectarian traditions of the small socialist groupings from which they came, but immensely serious in going about their political tasks. It was their misfortune to be overwhelmed by two catastrophes, the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the events that culminated in the defeat

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2 Wood 1958.