Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Strange Death of Social-Democratic England

The most striking piece of news about Britain recently has aroused practically no comment. There are now over half a million unemployed, more than there have been in any June since the war, and since March the average increase in the number of unemployed each month has been 20,000. These facts are surely striking enough in themselves, but, when we add to them another fact, that this unemployment has been deliberately created by the government, we ought all of us surely to be a little more astonished and appalled than we are. Every previous Labour government regarded rising unemployment as a defeat, as a sign that its policy was not working or that it has chosen the wrong policy. This is the first Labour government which must regard rising unemployment as a victory for its policies, as a sign that they are working in the way that the Chancellor predicted that they would work. Left-wing critics of Labour governments have often felt able to accuse them of pursuing not socialist but Keynesian economic policy – a criticism which pays a quite undeserved compliment to former Labour Chancellors and at the same time quite gratuitously

insults Keynes. But Mr Jenkins is our first Labour Chancellor whose policies would even have been intelligible and acceptable to those as yet untouched by the Keynesian revolution, and it is well worth asking why Labour has made, and has felt able to make, this total change of attitude. If we are to do so, however, we must remember that a political change on this scale never occurs in isolation. Indeed, I want to go so far as to suggest that what we are seeing is a major change in the social scene, a change which might well be called ‘The Strange Death of Social-Democratic England’.

It is now over thirty years since George Dangerfield published a book called *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, in which he diagnosed in the years 1910–13 a fundamental change in the assumptions which defined British politics. One can summarise an important part of Dangerfield’s thesis by remembering that, in the decades before 1910, politics had been played according to Liberal rules, even by the opponents of Liberalism. And then those whom Liberalism excluded or pretended did not exist suddenly rose around it on all sides: trade unionists in militant strike action, suffragettes, Irish nationalists, Irish Unionists. What would have happened if the German Emperor had not rescued England from internal strife by kindly invading Belgium is a great unanswerable question. But the central moral is clear. When the parliamentary system cannot express the major social conflicts of an age, then those conflicts will be expressed not only outside but against that system. It is some of the consequences of this truth that I want to explore now.

I have suggested that if the years from 1910 to 1913 witnessed the strange death of Liberal England, then the years which we are living through now are witnessing the strange death of social democracy. The basic premises of social democracy were twofold. The first was that class conflict was genuine, that in the market economy of classical capitalism the interests of the working class ran clean counter to those interests which relied upon the smooth working of the economic system. This premise social democrats shared with a variety of revolutionary socialists, whether communists, syndicalists or anarchists. But they differed from all varieties of revolutionary socialist in holding that a second premise was true, namely that the political system of parliamentary democracy can at once contain and express that conflict. The classical social-democratic belief is that the interests of the working class can be expressed by

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2 Dangerfield 1936.