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LIFE AND TIMES OF THE FIRST NEW LEFT

THE 'FIRST' NEW LEFT was born in 1956, a conjuncture—not just a year—bounded on one side by the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks and on the other by the British and French invasion of the Suez Canal zone.¹ These two events, whose dramatic impact was heightened by the fact that they occurred within days of each other, unmasked the underlying violence and aggression latent in the two systems that dominated political life at the time—Western imperialism and Stalinism—and sent a shock wave through the political world. In a deeper sense, they defined for people of my generation the boundaries and limits of the tolerable in politics. Socialists after 'Hungary', it seemed to us, must carry in their hearts the sense of tragedy which the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into Stalinism represented for the left in the twentieth century. 'Hungary' brought to an end a certain kind of socialist innocence. On the other hand, 'Suez' underlined the enormity of the error in believing that lowering the Union Jack in a few ex-colonies necessarily signalled the 'end of imperialism', or that the real gains of the welfare state and the widening of material affluence meant the end of inequality and exploitation. 'Hungary' and 'Suez' were thus liminal, boundary-marking experiences. They symbolized the break-up of the political Ice Age.

The New Left came into existence in the aftermath of these two events. It attempted to define a third political space somewhere between these two metaphors. Its rise signified for people on the left in my generation the end of the imposed silences and political impasses of the Cold War, and the possibility of a breakthrough into a new socialist project. It may be useful to begin with genealogy. The term 'New Left' is commonly associated with '1968', but to the '1956' New Left generation, '1968' was

already a second, even perhaps a third, mutation. We had borrowed the phrase in the 1950s from the movement known as the *nouvelle gauche*, an independent tendency in French politics associated with the weekly newspaper *France Observateur* and its editor, Claude Bourdet. A leading figure in the French Resistance, Bourdet personified the attempt, after the war, to open a ‘third way’ in European politics, independent of the two dominant left positions of Stalinism and social democracy, beyond the military power blocs of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and opposed to both the American and the Soviet presences in Europe.

This ‘third position’ paralleled the political aspirations of many of the people who came together to form the early British New Left. Some of us had met Bourdet in Paris, at a conference called to consider setting up an International Socialist Society, across the divisions of Western and Eastern Europe. The main protagonist of the idea in Britain was G. D. H. Cole, an austere and courageous veteran of the independent left, who was at that time still teaching politics at Oxford. Although he was a distinguished historian of European socialism and a student of Marxism, Cole’s socialism was rooted in the cooperative and ‘workers’ control’ traditions of Guild Socialism. His critique of bureaucratic ‘Morrisonian’-style nationalization was enormously influential in shaping the attitude of many socialists of my generation towards statist forms of socialism.

The New Left represented the coming together of two related but different traditions—also of two political experiences or generations. One was the tradition I would call, for want of a better term, communist humanism, symbolized by the *New Reasoner* and its founders, John Saville and Edward and Dorothy Thompson. The second is perhaps best described as an independent socialist tradition, whose centre of gravity lay in the

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Alan Hall, with whom I shared many of the experiences of those times. I first met Alan when he came to Balliol in 1952 from Aberdeen. He subsequently lectured in classics at Keele and was a passionate archaeologist of Graeco-Roman remains in Anatolia. He played a key role in the early New Left (including the passage from first to second generation) but died, tragically, in his fifties before he had the opportunity to put the New Left story on record himself. ‘The First New Left: Life and Times’ was originally presented as a paper at the 1988 ‘Out of Apathy’ conference on the New Left, held in Oxford; a longer version appeared in the collection, *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On*, London 1989, edited by Robin Archer and others.

left student generation of the 1950s and which maintained some distance from 'party' affiliations. It was people from this layer who, in the disintegration of those orthodoxies in 1956, first produced *Universities and Left Review*. I belong to this second tradition.

Arrivals

It may help to understand that moment better if I speak personally. I arrived in Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, more or less straight from school in Jamaica, in 1951. I would say that my politics were principally 'anti-imperialist'. I was sympathetic to the left, had read Marx and been influenced by him while at school, but I would not, at the time, have called myself a Marxist in the European sense. In any event, I was troubled by the failure of orthodox Marxism to deal adequately with either 'Third World' issues of race and ethnicity, and questions of racism, or with literature and culture, which preoccupied me intellectually as an undergraduate. Retrospectively, I would identify myself as one of those described by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* who, following as a student of literature the engagement between the Leavisites and the Marxist critics, was obliged to acknowledge that '*Scrutiny* won'. Not because it was right—we were always critical of the conservative elitism of *Scrutiny's* cultural programme—but because the alternative Marxist models were far too mechanical and reductive. (We did not yet have access to Lukács, Benjamin, Gramsci or Adorno.) On the wider political front, I was strongly critical of everything I knew about Stalinism, either as a political system or as a form of politics. I opposed it as a model for a democratic socialism and could not fathom the reluctance of the few Communists I met to acknowledge the truth of what was by then common knowledge about its disastrous consequences for Soviet society and Eastern Europe.

Like the rest of the small number of 'Third World' students at Oxford, my principal political concerns were with colonial questions. I became very involved in West Indian student politics. We debated and discussed, mainly, what was going on 'back home' in the expectation that before long we would all be there and involved in it. We argued about the West Indian Federation and the prospects for a new Caribbean economic order, the expulsion of the left from Manley's PNP Party in Jamaica under the pressures of the Cold War, the overthrow of the Jagan government in British Guiana, with the suspension of the constitution and the moving

in of British troops. There was no ‘black politics’ in Britain; post-war migration had only just begun.

Later, as I began to take a wider interest in British politics, I came more into contact with the Oxford left. There was no ‘mass’ British political movement of the left or major popular political issue to which one could attach oneself. The choice seemed to be between a Labour Party which, at that moment, was deeply committed to an Atlanticist world-view, and the outer darkness of the far left. The first time I ventured into a Communist Group discussion meeting was to debate with the CP the application of Marx’s concept of class to contemporary capitalist society. At the time, I felt that this was an extremely bold move—such was the climate of fear and suspicion which prevailed. After 1954, this climate began to change. There was a slow, hesitant revival of debate on the left and a group began to emerge around these discussions. Many of us attended the ‘Cole Group’ (as his seminar in politics was known), which, though formally an occasion for graduate students, doubled up as a wide-ranging discussion group of the broad left. Some of the earliest contacts and friendships, which were later to be cemented by the formation of the New Left, were forged there.

It is difficult now to conjure up the political climate of Oxford in the 1950s. The Cold War dominated the political horizon, positioning everyone and polarizing every topic by its remorseless binary logic. ‘To recommend the admission of China to the UN was to invite the opprobrium of “fellow-traveller”; to say that the character of contemporary capitalism had changed was to be ranked as a “Keynesian liberal”’, as the first *ULR* editorial put it.² The ‘thaw’ began as a debate about a range of contemporary issues: the future of Labour and the left in the wake of the Conservative revival, the nature of the welfare state and post-war capitalism, the impact of cultural change on British society in the early ‘affluent’ years of the decade. The pace of this debate was accelerated by the Khrushchev revelations at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. The response to ‘1956’ and the formation of a New Left could not have occurred without this prior period of ‘preparation’, in which a number of people slowly gained the confidence to engage in a dialogue which questioned the terms of orthodox political argument and cut across existing organizational boundaries.

² Editorial, *Universities and Left Review* 1, Spring 1957, p. i.

These strands were dramatically condensed by the events of '1956'. Soviet tanks in Budapest terminated any hope that a more human and democratic brand of communism would evolve in Eastern Europe without prolonged trauma and social convulsion. Suez punctured the cosy illusion that (to adapt Tawney's phrase) 'you could skin the capitalist-imperialist tiger stripe by stripe'. The Trafalgar Square Suez demonstration was the first mass political rally of its kind in the 1950s, and the first time I encountered police horses face to face, or heard Hugh Gaitskell and Nye Bevan speak in public. Bevan's fierce denunciation of Eden, I remember, scattered the startled pigeons into flight. One outcome of the ferment of '1956' was the publication of the two journals, *Universities and Left Review* and the *New Reasoner*, which, when they subsequently merged in 1960, formed the 'first' New Left Review.

A new student left

How and why did this happen then—and why, of all places, partly in Oxford? In the 1950s universities were not, as they later became, centres of revolutionary activity. A minority of privileged left-wing students, debating consumer capitalism and the embourgeoisement of working-class culture amidst the 'dreaming spires', may seem, in retrospect, a pretty marginal political phenomenon. Nevertheless, the debate was joined with a fierce intensity, self-consciously counterposed to the brittle, casual confidence of Oxford's dominant tone, set by the attempts of the 'Hooray Henries' of its time to relive *Brideshead Revisited*. In fact, Oxford also contained its rebel enclaves: demobbed young veterans and national servicemen, Ruskin College trade unionists, 'scholarship boys' and girls from home and abroad. Although they were unable to redefine its dominant culture, these outsiders did come to constitute an alternative—not to say beleaguered—intellectual minority culture. This was the '*ULR* constituency'.

The Oxford left was very diverse. There was a small number of CP members—including Raphael Samuel, Peter Sedgwick, Gabriel Pearson—mainly in Balliol, where Christopher Hill was the tutor in Modern History. Next there was the great body of Labour Club supporters, the majority firmly attached to Fabian, labourist and reformist positions, and a few with their eyes fixed unswervingly on their coming parliamentary careers. Finally there were the 'independents', including some serious Labour people, who were intellectually aligned with neither

of these two camps and shuttled somewhat uneasily between them. The latter group attracted more than its fair share of exiles and migrants, which reinforced its cosmopolitanism. Charles (Chuck) Taylor was a French-Canadian Rhodes scholar, as well as that even more perplexing phenomenon, a sort of Catholic Marxist; Dodd Alleyne was Trinidadian, I was Jamaican; Sadiq al-Mahdi was later to play a significant role in the Sudan; Clovis Maksoud was a founder member of the Syrian Ba'ath Party. Some, like Alan Lovell, a Welsh pacifist, Alan Hall, a Scots classicist, and Raphael Samuel, Gabriel Pearson, Stanley Mitchell and Robert Cassen, who were all Jewish, were what one might call internal émigrés.

The locus of our debate was the Socialist Club, a moribund organization left more or less abandoned since its thirties Popular Front days, which we resuscitated. It became clear that similar debates were developing in other universities and that there ought to be some common platform for this emerging student left. This explains the word 'Universities' in the title of the journal we eventually produced. The other half of its cumbersome and extremely uncommercial title signalled our concern with cultural questions, via a symbolic link with the *Left Review*, a wide-ranging and unorthodox literary and cultural journal of the 1930s and 1940s, more receptive to new cultural movements (for example, in its openness to Modernist currents) than any comparable 'party' journal of its time; Brecht was first published in England in its pages. The advent of 1956, however, destroyed the student-bound confines of this debate and catapulted us into the maelstrom of national and international left politics. The first issue of *Universities and Left Review*, which appeared in spring 1957, had four editors: Raphael Samuel and Gabriel Pearson, who left the CP after Hungary, and Charles Taylor and myself, representing 'the independents'. Its contents and contributors—Isaac Deutscher, Bourdet, Lindsay Anderson, Thompson, Cole, Eric Hobsbawm, Graeme Shankland on town planning, David Marquand on *Lucky Jim*, Joan Robinson, Basil Davidson—clearly demonstrate this translation to a wider stage.

English Marxist traditions

The New Left had equally important, though very different, roots in another tradition, represented by the *New Reasoner*. This tendency had its formation in Communist and Popular Front politics in Britain. Some of the 'Reasoners'—Edward Thompson, John Saville, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, Victor Kiernan, Eric Hobsbawm—had belonged to that

unique enclave, the Communist Party Historians Group which, under the inspiration of the little-known Dona Torr, developed a highly independent and original reading of British history, and a form of Marxist politics much more in touch with English popular radicalism, and quite distinct in style and inspiration from that sustained in the CP leadership by powerful but deeply sectarian figures like Palme Dutt.

The revelations of the Twentieth Congress stimulated inside the Party a painful reassessment of the whole Stalinist experience and the *Reasoner* first appeared in this context, as an internal opposition bulletin insisting on an open and public 'calling to account'. It was only after they lost their struggle for the right to express what were officially defined as 'factional' opinions, and the disciplines of democratic centralism were mobilized against them, that the majority of the 'Reasoners' either left the Party or were expelled and the *New Reasoner* appeared as an independent journal of the left. The final issue of the *Reasoner* was planned and produced before Suez and Hungary but, for it, these events were 'epochal':

Even the urgency of the Egyptian crisis cannot disguise the fact that the events of Budapest represent a crucial turning-point for our Party. The aggression of British imperialism is uglier and more cynical than previous imperialist aggressions. But the crisis in world Communism is now different in kind.³

The New Left therefore represented the coming together of two different political traditions. How did this occur, and how well did it work? The organizational details of the amalgamation between the two journals can be quickly summarized. They continued to publish in tandem for a while, advertising and promoting each other. After a time the two editorial boards began to meet regularly around a broader political agenda, to appoint editorial board members in common and to recruit new ones. Both boards were increasingly preoccupied with the struggle to sustain the financial and commercial viability of two journals. Even more pressing was the cost in human capital. For many of us, normal life had more or less been suspended in 1956. Some had not stopped running round in circles since and were by then in a state of extreme political exhaustion. There were also, more positively, the opportunities we were missing to create a much wider, united political platform for our position. While we were aware of our differences, our perspectives had

³ E. P. Thompson, 'Through the Smoke of Budapest', *Reasoner*, November 1956.

come closer together in the months of collaboration. Out of this variety of factors came the decision to merge and, with more suitable candidates like Thompson and others being unwilling to serve, I rashly agreed to become the first editor of *New Left Review*, with John Saville acting as chairman of the editorial board.

The first NLR

New Left Review in this form lasted two years. It was never, I think, as successful or distinctive a journal as either of its predecessors. The bimonthly rhythm and the pressures to connect with immediate political issues pushed us into becoming more of a left ‘magazine’ than a ‘journal’. This required a shift of journalistic and editorial style which did not square with the original political intention and for which the board was unprepared. There were differences of emphasis and style of work between the board, which carried the main political weight and authority of the movement, and the small working editorial group that began to assemble around 7, Carlisle Street in Soho.

The ‘New Reasoners’—Edward and Dorothy Thompson, John Saville, and others on the *Reasoner* board like Ronald Meek, Ken Alexander, Doris Lessing—belonged to a political generation formed by the experience of the Popular Front and the anti-Fascist movements of the thirties, the European Resistance movements during the War, the ‘Second Front’ campaigns for ‘friendship with the Soviet Union’ and the popular turn to the left reflected in the 1945 Labour victory. Although some younger Communists in the *ULR* tendency also belonged to this tradition, their relation to it was always different. In its overwhelming majority, the *ULR* generation’s centre of gravity was irrevocably ‘post-war’. This was a difference not of age but of formation—a question of political generations, within which the War constituted the symbolic dividing line. These differences did produce subtle tensions which surfaced around the new journal.

These differences of formation and political style of work were magnified by the location of the two tendencies in two quite distinct social and cultural milieus. The *New Reasoner*’s base was in Yorkshire and the industrial North. Although it had many readers elsewhere, it was organically rooted in a provincial political culture—not just that of the labour movement but also of organizations like the Yorkshire Peace Committee—and was intensely suspicious of ‘London’. *ULR* also attracted support from many

parts of the country; but it very much belonged to what the 'Reasoners' thought of as the 'cosmopolitan' or 'Oxford–London' axis. Although we did not consciously understand it at the time, the *ULR*-ers were modernists, if not actually 'rootless cosmopolitans'. As a colonial, I certainly felt instinctively more at home in the more socially anonymous metropolitan culture, though I regretted *ULR*'s lack of organic connections to non-metropolitan working-class life.

It should by now be clear that, even within the editorial boards of the original journals, the New Left was far from monolithic and certainly never became culturally or politically homogeneous. The tensions were, for the most part, humanely and generously handled. But any careful reader of the journals will quickly be able to identify real points of difference and, on occasion, fiercely contended debates surfacing in their pages. It would therefore be quite wrong to attempt to reconstruct, retrospectively, some essential 'New Left', and to impose on it a political unity it never possessed. Nevertheless, although no two members would offer the same list, there was a set of linked themes which commanded wide enough assent to make it distinctive as a political formation.

In my reading, this centred on the argument that any prospect for the renewal of the left had to begin with a new conception of socialism and a radically new analysis of the social relations, dynamics and culture of post-war capitalism. Far from constituting a modest updating exercise, this was a far-reaching, ambitious and multifaceted intellectual project. So far as socialism was concerned, it meant coming to terms with the depressing experiences of both 'actual existing socialism' and 'actual existing social democracy' and transforming, in the light of those experiences, the very conception of 'the political'. So far as the latter was concerned, what we called modern 'corporate capitalism' had very different economic, organizational, social and cultural forms. It functioned according to a different 'logic' from that of entrepreneurial capitalism, described in Marx's classic theses or embedded in the language and theory of the left and inscribed in its agendas, its institutions and its revolutionary scenarios. For many of us (though not for everyone) this struggle to ground socialism in a new analysis of 'our times' was primary and originating—where the whole New Left project began.

The dominant account offered was that we were entering a 'post-capitalist' society in which the principal problems of social distribution had been

solved by the post-war boom coupled to the expansion of the welfare state, Keynesian macroeconomic regulation and the 'human face' of the managerial revolution. All these were elements of what later came to be known as 'corporatism'—big capital, big state—or, from another point of view, the 'post-war consensus'. They had led to an erosion of traditional class cultures and the 'embourgeoisement' of the working class. Opposed to this scenario was the 'Old Left' argument that since the system was still patently capitalist, nothing of any significance had changed. The classes and the class struggle were exactly what and where they had always been, and to question this was to betray the revolutionary cause.

The majority of the New Left, however, refused this binary logic. The new forms of property, corporate organization and the dynamics of modern accumulation and consumption required a new analysis. These processes had had effects on social structure and political consciousness. More broadly, the spread of consumerism had disarticulated many traditional cultural attitudes and social hierarchies, and this had consequences for politics, the constituencies for change and the institutions and agendas of the left, with which socialism must come to terms. Lacking much indigenous material to go on, the American analysts—Riesman, Galbraith, Wright Mills—who were at the cutting edge of these developments provided us with our main purchase on these arguments.

Culture and politics

Closely linked to this was the argument about the contradictory and politically indeterminate 'drift' of social and cultural change. These changes fell short of a transformation of society, yet clearly but ambiguously dismantled many of the old relations and formations on which the whole edifice of the left and the project of socialism had historically been constructed. Again, there were at least two competing versions of this. One was that since the fundamental class structure of British society remained intact, 'change' could be only of the most superficial 'sociological' kind. It picked up incidental and mainly stylistic differences in such marginal areas as new attitudes and lifestyles amongst young people, new patterns of urban life, the movement out of the inner cities, the growing importance of consumption in everyday life, the 'weakening' of older social identities, and so on, which did not touch 'the fundamentals'. This fundamentalist account was matched, on the other side, by a relentless celebration of change for its own sake in which the new mass media had acquired a

massive investment. With the expansion of the 'new journalism' and the rise of commercial television, society seemed bewitched by images of itself in motion, reflecting off its shiny consumer surfaces.

Again, the New Left insisted on occupying neither of these simple alternatives, choosing instead a more complex 'third' description. We were not necessarily at one in terms of how we understood these shifts (the exchange between Edward Thompson, Raphael Samuel and myself on my speculative piece, 'A Sense of Classlessness', in the pages of *ULR* is one *locus classicus* of this debate), but we were agreed about their significance. In my view, much that was creative, albeit chaotic and impressionistic, about the 'picture of the world' which came from the pages of New Left writing owed its freshness and vitality (as well as its utopianism) to the effort to sketch the meanings of these rapidly shifting contours of change. That is indeed one place where the New Left investment in the debate about culture first arose. First, because it was in the cultural and ideological domain that social change appeared to be making itself most dramatically visible. Second, because the cultural dimension seemed to us not a secondary, but a constitutive dimension of society. (This reflects part of the New Left's long-standing quarrel with the reductionism and economism of the base–superstructure metaphor.) Third, because the discourse of culture seemed to us fundamentally necessary to any language in which socialism could be redescribed. The New Left therefore took the first faltering steps of putting questions of cultural analysis and cultural politics at the centre of its politics.

In these different ways, the New Left launched an assault on the narrow definition of 'politics' and tried to project in its place an 'expanded conception of the political'. If it did not move so far as the feminist principle that 'the personal is political', it certainly opened itself up to the critical dialectic between 'private troubles' and 'public issues', which blew the conventional conception of politics apart. The logic implied by our position was that these 'hidden dimensions' had to be represented within the discourses of 'the political' and that ordinary people could and should organize where they were, around issues of immediate experience; begin to articulate their dissatisfactions in an existential language and build an agitation from that point. (This was the source of our much-debated 'socialist humanism'.) The expanded definition of the political also entailed a recognition of the proliferation of potential sites of social conflict and constituencies for change. Although we were in favour of a

strong trade unionism, we contested the idea that only those at the 'point of production' could make the revolution.

The critique of reformism and its singularly British representative, 'Labourism', was entailed in this enlarged discourse of 'the political'. We looked for a more radical and structural transformation of society: partly because we were committed to many of the fundamental perspectives of the classical socialist programme; partly because we saw in modern capitalism a greater, not a lesser concentration of social power and could trace the impact of 'commodification' in areas of life far removed from the immediate sites of wage-labour exploitation; but above all because of the much broader critique we had of 'capitalist civilization and culture'. No one expressed the fundamental and constitutive character of this argument for and within the New Left more profoundly than Raymond Williams. It was in this sense that we remained 'revolutionaries', though few retained any faith in a vanguardist seizure of state power. The opposition between 'reform' and 'revolution' seemed to many of us outdated: more a way of swearing at and anathematizing others than having any real analytic-historical value in its own right. We sought, in different ways, to bypass it.

In these and other significant ways, the dominant tendency of the New Left was 'revisionist' with respect both to Labourism and to Marxism. We had come into existence and now lived in the age of 'many Marxisms'. Few, if any, of us could have been described, after 1956, as 'orthodox'—principally because, though we held different positions about how much of Marxism could be transposed without 'revision' to the second half of the twentieth century, all of us refused to regard it as a fixed and finished doctrine or sacred text. For example, of considerable importance to some of us was the rediscovery, through Chuck Taylor, of Marx's early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, with their themes of alienation, species being and 'new needs', which he brought over from Paris in 1958 in French and which only shortly thereafter became available to us in an English translation.

New Left Clubs

There were many other themes which any comprehensive account would be obliged to discuss: the debate around 'socialist humanism', the analyses of the Third World and, in connection with the Campaign for

Nuclear Disarmament, 'neutralism', NATO and disarmament; popular culture and the media. However, since the New Left is so often tagged as mainly an intellectual formation, it may be more appropriate to remind readers that the 'first' New Left, however mistakenly, thought of itself as a movement rather than simply a journal. Shortly after the publication of the first issue, *ULR* called its first 'readers' meeting' on an inauspicious Sunday afternoon, which was followed by the foundation of the London *ULR* Club. In the early years the Club (later the London New Left Club) attracted to its weekly meetings audiences of three or four hundred, drawn from the whole spectrum of the left. For a time it provided an extremely important, lively, often contentious focal point for people with no other formal political commitment. It differed from the typical left organization or sect in that its purpose was not to recruit members but to engage with the political culture of the left on a very broad front, through argument, debate, discussion and education.

The Club became an important independent centre for left politics in London, particularly after it found a permanent home—through another of Raphael Samuel's nerve-rackingly risky but brilliantly innovative ventures—in the Partisan Café in Carlisle Street. This was the first left 'coffee bar' in London, with a clubhouse and library on the floors above. On the fourth floor it housed the offices of *ULR*, later to become those of *NLR*. Following the merger, a number of New Left clubs sprang up around the country. The last issue of *NLR* which I edited, number 12, listed thirty-nine in various stages of political health. The clubs reflected, in programme and composition, the cultural and political character of their localities: the Manchester and Hull Left Clubs were close to the local labour movement; the Fife Socialist League was linked, through Lawrence Daly, to an independent socialist movement amongst miners in Scotland; the Croydon and Hemel Hempstead Clubs had a more 'cross-class' or even 'déclassé-new-town' feel to them.

Very early on, the London New Left Club pioneered the propaganda and leafleting for the first *CND* Aldermaston March, which the club membership supported en masse. This was the beginning of close links between the New Left, the modern peace movement in Britain and the birth of *CND* as a mass political organization. Among its other activities, the New Left Club in London became deeply involved in 1958 with the race riots in Notting Hill and with the anti-racist struggles of the period around North Kensington. We participated in the efforts to establish tenants'

associations in the area, helped to protect black people who, at the height of the ‘troubles’, were molested and harassed by white crowds in an ugly mood between Notting Hill station and their homes, and picketed Mosley and other far-right meetings. In the course of this work we first stumbled across the powerful traces of racism inside the local Labour Party itself, and Rachel Powell, an active club member, unearthed the scandal of ‘Rachmanism’ and white landlord exploitation in Notting Hill.

Peter Sedgwick once acutely observed that the New Left was less a movement than a ‘milieu’. He was noting the lack of tight organizational structure, the loose conception of leadership, the flat hierarchies, the absence of membership, rules, regulations, party programme or ‘line’ which characterized the New Left, in sharp contrast with other political tendencies and sects on the far left. These features were the product of our critique of Leninist and democratic-centralist forms of organization and emphasis on self-organization and participatory politics, which we can now see retrospectively as ‘prefigurative’ of so much that was to come afterwards. Sedgwick may also have been obliquely commenting on the low level of working-class participation—or, to be more accurate, the ‘cross-class competition’ of many, though by no means all, of the New Left clubs. This could be seen as—and indeed was—a serious weakness, but oddly enough, it also had some compensations. Where the clubs were particularly strong was in those social strata emerging within and across the rapidly shifting, recomposing-decomposing class landscapes of post-war Britain. This separated us, not from ordinary working people, for we had many of those as active supporters, but from the political cultures of the traditional labour movement and the revolutionary cadres of the sects. Nevertheless, it gave the New Left a privileged access to the grinding, grating processes of contradictory social change.

Prefigurative practice

With all their weaknesses, the clubs signified the project of the New Left to be a new kind of socialist entity: not a party but a ‘movement of ideas’. They were a sign that, for us and for the left, the ‘question of agency’ had become deeply problematic. We adopted this approach partly out of conviction, partly because we thought the movement of ordinary people into politics—breaking with the crust of conventional opinions and orthodox alignments in their own lives, on a concrete issue, and beginning to ‘take action for themselves’—was more politically significant than the

most correct of 'correct lines'. Another reason was that we saw in embryo in *CND* a new kind of political mobilization—beyond, so to speak, the big party battalions—which reflected certain emergent social forces and aspirations characteristic of their time, in relation to which it was necessary for the left to develop a new political practice.

CND was one of the first of this type of 'social movement' to appear in post-war politics—a popular movement with an unambiguously radical thrust and an implicit 'anti-capitalist' content, formed through self-activity in civil society around a concrete issue, but lacking a clear class composition and appealing to people across the strongly drawn lines of traditional class identity or organizational loyalties. It was already possible to recognize in these new movements features of modern society and points of social antagonism which—like the civil-rights movement at the time, and feminist and sexual questions, ecological and environmental issues, community politics, welfare rights and anti-racist struggles in the 1970s and 1980s—have proved difficult to construct within the organizational agendas of the traditional left. Without these social movements, however, no contemporary mass political mobilization or movement for radical change in modern times is now conceivable.

Ultimately what *CND* posed for the New Left—as the new social movements always do—was the problem of how to articulate these new impulses and social forces with the more traditional class politics of the left; and how, through this articulation, the project of the left could be transformed. The fact that we had no greater success than the left has had since in trying to construct a 'historical bloc' out of such heterogeneous social interests, political movements and agendas, in building a hegemonic political practice out of, and with, these differences, does not negate the urgency of the task. What we can learn from the 'first' New Left here is what questions to ask, not which answers work.

As far as the Labour Party was concerned, many people in and around the New Left were members of it. Many were not. As a movement, our attitude to the Labour Party was quite clear. Our independence from organizational links, controls, party routines and discipline was essential for our political project. The majority vote for unilateralism at the Labour Party Conference, for which many of us campaigned, was a clear example to us of 'defeat-in-victory', as a result of mistaking a platform victory for the winning of new popular political positions. Inside the

machine, CND withered and shrivelled into a talisman, a fetish of party conference resolutions, plaything of the manoeuvres of the block vote, without touching ground in the political consciousness or activity of many actual people.

At the same time we recognized that the fate of socialism in Britain was inextricably bound up with the fate and fortunes of Labour. We recognized Labour as, for good or ill, the Party which had hegemonized the vast majority of the organized working class with a reformist politics. We honoured its historic links to the trade-union movement. We acknowledged it as the engine of the 'welfare state' revolution of 1945 which we never underestimated because it represented a reform, rather than an overthrow, of the system. We remained deeply critical of the Fabian and labourist cultures of the Party, of its 'statism', its lack of popular roots in the political and cultural life of ordinary people, its bureaucratic suspicion of any independent action or 'movement' outside its limits, and its profound anti-intellectualism. We opposed the deeply undemocratic procedures of the block vote and the Party's empty 'constitutionalism'. Yet we knew the Labour Party represented, whether we liked it or not, the strategic stake in British politics, which no one could ignore.

We therefore developed an open and polemical politics in relation to the Gaitskell leadership, on the one hand, and the 'nothing-has-changed, reaffirm-Clause-4' perspective of the traditional left on the other; taking up—here as elsewhere—a third position, opening a 'third front'. In the revisionist debates of the 1950s and 1960s we opposed the post-capitalist, 'human face of corporate capitalism' theses proposed in Crosland's *The Future of Socialism*, while recognizing him as a formidable and intelligent opponent. We insisted—against the doctrinal immobilism of much of the Labour and trade-union left—on the necessity of grounding the perspectives of the left in a new analysis of the novel conditions of post-war capitalism and social change. Some people would continue to work for this inside the Labour Party; others worked outside. We did not see how there could be a 'correct' line on this issue when there was so little relationship between what people wanted politically and the vehicle for achieving it. Our strategy was therefore to sidestep it and instead to involve people, whatever their affiliations, in independent political activity and debate.

This 'parallel' strategy required, as its necessary condition, the maintenance of journals, clubs, a network of contacts and forms of demonstration, argument and propaganda to articulate this 'third position', which were not subject to the routines of the Labour HQ at Transport House but were nevertheless designed to break back into and have an effect on the internal politics of the Labour Party and the labour movement. We called this the strategy of 'one foot in, one foot out'.

Going to the people

What type of organizational leadership did these strategies presuppose? The metaphor to which we constantly returned was that of 'the socialist propaganda'. As Edward Thompson put it in the *New Reasoner*:

The New Left does not propose itself as an alternative organization to those already in the field; rather, it offers two things to those within and without the existing organizations—a specific propaganda of ideas, and certain practical services (journals, clubs, schools, etc).⁴

The notion of a 'socialist propaganda of ideas' was, of course, borrowed directly and explicitly from William Morris and the relationships forged in the Socialist League between intellectuals, struggling to make themselves what Gramsci called 'organic', and the working class. We had all read and been inspired by the 'Making Socialists' chapter of Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. Indeed, the first editorial of NLR was framed at either end by a quote from Morris's *Commonweal* article of July 1885: 'The Labour movement is not in its insurrectionary phase.' I added: 'we are in our missionary phase'.⁵

Although it was not fully theorized, this conception of leadership was based on certain clear presuppositions. The first was the necessity of challenging the conventional anti-intellectualism of the British labour movement and overcoming the traditional division between intellectuals and the working class. The second was the repudiation of three alternative models: 'vanguardist' and 'democratic-centralist' conceptions of revolutionary leadership; Fabian notions of the middle-class 'experts' within the state machine giving socialism to the working classes; and the

⁴ Thompson, 'The New Left', *New Reasoner* 9, Summer 1959, p. 16.

⁵ Hall, 'Introducing NLR', *NLR* 1/1, Jan–Feb 1960, p. 2.

traditional Labour left faith in constitutional mechanisms, conference resolutions, winning the block votes and ‘electoral contests with slightly more “left” candidates’.⁶ Third, our view was that changes in British society had brought a large number of the new, post-war social strata within reach of socialist education and propaganda. Fourth, we had a deep conviction that against the economism of the Stalinist, Trotskyist and Labourist left alike, socialism was a *conscious* democratic movement and socialists were *made*, not born or given by the inevitable laws of history or the objective processes of the mode of production alone.

We also challenged the prevailing view that the so-called affluent society would of itself erode the appeal of socialist propaganda—that socialism could arise only out of immiseration and degradation. Our emphasis on people taking action for themselves, ‘building socialism from below’ and ‘in the here and now’, not waiting for some abstract Revolution to transform everything in the twinkling of an eye, proved, in the light of the re-emergence of these themes after 1968, strikingly prefigurative. As we put it in the first issue of NLR:

We have to go into towns and cities, universities and technical colleges, youth clubs and Trade Union branches and—as Morris said—make socialists there. We have come through 200 years of capitalism and 100 years of imperialism. Why should people—naturally—turn to socialism? There is no law which says that the Labour Movement, like a great inhuman engine, is going to throb its way into socialism or that we can, any longer . . . rely upon poverty and exploitation to drive people, like blind animals, towards socialism. Socialism is, and will remain, an active faith in a new society, to which we turn as conscious, thinking human beings. People have to be confronted with experience, called to the ‘society of equals’, not because they have never had it so bad, but because the ‘society of equals’ is better than the best soft-selling consumer capitalist society, and life is something lived, not something one passes through like tea through a strainer.⁷

This position may seem naive and has certainly been dubbed ‘utopian’ and ‘populist’ since. But it was populist in the Narodnik sense of ‘going to the people’ and in terms of what they/we might become, rather than in the sense of massaging popular consent by cynical appeals to what the people are said by their betters to want. We had an instinctive, if not well-formulated, notion that the socialist project had to be rooted in the here

⁶ Thompson, ‘The New Left’, p. 16.

⁷ Hall, ‘Introducing NLR’, p. 3.

and now and connect with lived experience: with what we have since learned to call 'the national-popular'. 'The people' is, of course, always a discursive construction and the blurring of a precise social referent in the populism of the early New Left was certainly significant. But there is more than one kind of populism and it can, despite all its problems, be articulated either to the right or the left, and serve either to short-circuit or to develop popular antagonisms. The 'populism' of the early New Left was certainly of the latter sort, as Edward Thompson, its main architect, put it in the *New Reasoner*:

What will distinguish the New Left will be its rupture with the tradition of inner-party factionalism, and its renewal of the tradition of open association, socialist education and activity directed towards the people as a whole . . . It will insist that the Labour Movement is not a thing, but an association of men and women; that working people are not the passive recipients of economic and cultural conditioning, but are intellectual and moral beings . . . It will appeal to people by rational argument and moral challenge. It will counter the philistine materialism and anti-intellectualism of the Old Left by appealing to the totality of human interests and potentialities, and by constructing new channels of communication between industrial workers and experts in the sciences and arts. It will cease to postpone the satisfactions of Socialism to an hypothetic period 'after the Revolution', but will seek to promote in the present, and in particular in the great centres of working-class life, a richer sense of community.⁸

The tensions and contradictions implicit in this 'populism' were never wholly resolved. The rapid shifts in social structure of the post-war period, which we constantly tried to characterize without pinning them down precisely, cut unevenly into the New Left; we failed to build these differences into a new 'historical bloc', though that was our implicit aim. The tensions already alluded to between the provincial North and cosmopolitan London, like later versions of the North/South divide, were much more complex than this simple opposition suggests. Nevertheless, they shadowed some critical differences in the pace and character of class recomposition and social decomposition in post-war British society and came to stand metonymically for the diversifying ground of politics, without providing a principle of articulation. The tensions between intellectuals and activists were a continuing, if largely unspoken, problem connected to the much wider issue of the uncertain status of intellectuals in English cultural life generally and the disabling philistinism of

⁸ Thompson, 'The New Left', pp. 16-7.

the left. Cutting across all these tensions from another direction was the almost totally hidden question of gender—the fact that the great majority of the editorial-board leadership were men and that many of those on whom the actual work of keeping the whole enterprise going fell were women: the usual sexual division of labour, reproduced so often in the left. About this last question the New Left preserved—as did the rest of the left—a profound unconsciousness.

We hoped that the clubs would develop their own independent organization, leadership and channels of communication (perhaps their own news-sheet or bulletin), leaving the journal free to develop its own project. But we lacked the resources to bring this about, which exacerbated in the clubs feelings that they had no control over the journal, and in the editorial board the fear that a journal of ideas could not be effectively run by committees. It was, in effect, this last issue and the cross-pressures associated with it which finally precipitated my own resignation from the editorship of *New Left Review* in 1961.

It is not for me to attempt any overall assessment of the ‘first’ New Left, which I see as only a first stage in the constitution of a new kind of left politics. It seems absurd to attempt to defend its record in detail or to impose, retrospectively, a consistency it did not possess. Its strengths and weaknesses, errors and mistakes, remain and are unanswerable—to be learned from rather than repudiated. Nevertheless I would make the sharpest distinction between what we did and how we did it, and the wider project. I remain as committed to the latter as I was then. The ‘third space’ which the ‘first’ New Left defined and tried to prise open still seems to me the only hope for the renewal of the democratic and socialist project in our new and bewildering times.