

THE BIG SWIPE

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THIS could go on for ever. In *ULR* 5 I was rash enough to print a rather over-dramatised and badly written piece entitled "A Sense of Classlessness". Since then, the roof has been falling in all over the place, and I want to take the opportunity to pick up one or two of the bricks and heave them back. Both Edward Thompson and Ralph Samuel came back on the attack in *ULR* 6 ("Commitment in Politics" and "Class and Classlessness"), and Cliff Slaughter pointed a couple of "friendly" guns from the pages of *Labour Review*.

Each critic's tack differs substantially, and it would be wrong to lump them all together in reply. But I think that, in general, no one was prepared to take my title seriously. I was principally arguing about the *sense* which many people have that they live in a more "open" society, in which class consciousness tended to play a lesser role than it had done previously. In other words, my piece was an admittedly impressionistic excursion into the field of working class *psychology*, and only more tentatively a discussion of the *facts of class power* in contemporary life. I was trying to deal with some of the causes of *apathy*, and tried to avoid sounding as if I believed it to be a good thing. I don't think I succeeded. But I think that, in spite of the many facts marshalled against me, part of the difficulty lay in the unwillingness of critics to discuss the relationship between working class psychology and "class consciousness". I suspect this is because, in spite of revisionism and reversionism, this is a field where what Edward Thompson calls Aunty Dogma still rules the roost.

Because of what I have just said, I accept a great deal of Ralph Samuel's analysis, particularly of contemporary British capitalism and the class relations within it; but I find his article not so much an answer to the points I raised as a piece which deserves to stand on its own. His argument that British society is today more class-bound and "closed" than at some other periods of the nineteenth century, I accept. He says that my "classlessness" arguments "co-exist—somewhat uneasily I feel—with the *Insiders* and *The Controllers*". But my own view is that what he dismisses as a contradiction in analysis (power elite analysis on the one hand, classlessness on the other) is a contradiction in the society itself. This was the starting point for *my* piece; how is it that a society which is *in fact* more class-bound, more "insider"-orientated, can *appear* to be more "open"? I think this is very much the position, and I feel that this view was substantiated by Samuel himself in his article in *ULR* 4, "The New Authoritarianism", where he pointed out the contradictory co-existence in modern capitalist states between the empty rhetoric of liberalism and the untampered violence of the State machine. Things just are this way, and I wrote my article not primarily, as Cliff Slaughter imagined, in order to "arm us for the struggle against capitalism" but because I wanted to know. (Until I know, I am probably arming them with scientifically constructed bent pitch-forks, but that is not a doubt which is likely to beset the Socialist Labour League).

The "class" model and the "status" model of society are not, as Samuel supposed, contradictory but complementary.

Some comments on the "Classlessness Controversy"

The search for status does not break down class barriers; it is even less an assault upon the centres of class power, whether they are the Establishment, Big Business or the Tory Party. It takes place *within* the class system, and is controlled by it. The most status-seeking Mrs. Jones is not going to belong to the Royal Yacht Club when she comes out at the paying-end of the local super-market; to begin with, she hasn't got enough money. That is a different thing from saying that she's a little better off than she was before the war, and that she thinks that, if she can afford a bit more in the weekly shopping, things can't be as bad as they used to be, and stand a good chance of getting better. It doesn't—and couldn't in fact—make her middle class (that is a social fact); it *could* make her less "class-conscious", less militant, less "solid Labour voter", even. All my article tried to do was to explore that "could" and that "less", and if anyone thinks this is not a real question, then he must either subscribe to the militant-masses/bourgeois leaders theory or look pretty silly after the next election.

Ralph Samuel also argued persuasively (the point was re-emphasised in Edward Thompson's article too) that the working class had *always* been open to the same pressures to conform and become respectable by the Victorian engineers of consent. Is this really so? I know about the benevolent despotism of second-generation businessmen in the Victorian hey-day, about Samuel Smiles, and the secular values of self-help and thrift in nineteenth century non-conformism. But is there a real comparison here, at least in the *degree*? What would have happened if Samuel Smiles had had access to two-and-a-half out of every five houses in the country through Associated Rediffusion (1958 figures)? Can the massive machine of "human relations" propaganda to which every large firm in the country has access really be compared with the influence of the Non-Conformist Church? After all, Non-Conformism was also, at root, a movement of social protest, and if it laid great emphasis upon self-help and other forms of social amelioration, it also contained deep elements of moral revulsion, which are built in to the Labour Movement itself! It was against the Establishment, whereas the I.C.I. adverts are a direct reflection of the ideology of a concentrated ruling group in capitalism today. The comparison seems to me phony, one of the traps of "the uses of history" which Edward Thompson so fervently favours. I do not anywhere suppose that we can read straight from advertising copy to the attitudes of working class people. True, the ad-men can only "suggest". But the result *could* be, not a break-up of the class system (a thing I never suggest) but a sense of confusion about what class *is* and how much it matters, and where "class" allegiances lie. I described this as a "sense of classlessness and a sense of class confusion", and I think if he got out on the knocker instead of on to the shop-floor and said to the first head that came round the corner, "Vote Labour", he would see what I mean. (The experience, unfortunately, has been denied the S.L.L. by the latest piece of bureaucratic barbarism at Transport House). I think that, until we admit that this sense of class confusion has become a dominant feature of the Stalemate State (it is what the

phrase "stalemate" actually *means* to me), we are likely to take too simple a view of what has happened to the Labour Movement, and of how we are to get out of the fix.

There is no point Cliff Slaughter sneering that I am only interested in "whether the notions (of class) are altered". That is *not all* I am interested in, but I am interested in this *as well*, and I think he ought to be too. In the long run, the development of socialism in Britain is going to depend upon what the real class interests are; but altered notions of class, if they exist, are going to tell pretty heavily at the next election as they did at the last, and that is going to have an effect upon how quickly we advance to socialism. In other words (this was my ideological point), the superstructure of ideas (in this case, false ideas, false consciousness) *is* going to affect directly the course of events. And if the admission of this fact makes us reconsider some of the more primitive notions—still current—of *how* to interpret Marx's dictum that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness", I, for one, can only say, "Long Live the Revisionists".

Mindless Militancy

I have less disagreement with Edward Thompson, who is only too right to stress that the "record of the working class" is a history of "a whole way of struggle". But I think he is far too defensive, and that this has led him into a mis-reading of the discussion about the advance in working-class standards of living and about working-class "materialism". I don't see how he could interpret anything I have said to mean that I deplore the fact that working people can now sometimes afford a car, or that women can relieve the drudgery of housework by the washing machine. Marx never argued that "work" was degrading; what he said was that "wage-labour" (the social relationship between Capital and Labour) was a form of class exploitation. All that I have added is my impression that "consumption" in a capitalist and class society is a relationship based on exploitation as well—surely an unexceptionable remark in the light, say, of Galbraith's study of *The Affluent Society*. What I was trying to argue was that, in a period when the majority of the working force has ceased to be "production workers" in the old sense, we need a different or modified set of criteria for explaining (to others and ourselves) what "exploitation" means—and therefore some rather new concepts to apply to the term "class struggle". Perhaps I can make what I am saying clearer in a short-hand form. Of course the "class" interests of the secondary modern teacher and the shop steward at Morris Motors are the same. But it is very difficult, as a matter of socialist tactics, to make them seem the same in a society where skills are highly differentiated. And the point of consciousness seems to me more easily discovered if we would recognise that the class struggle for the secondary modern teacher lies in the fight for the Comprehensive School and the social principles behind that. It was "mindless militancy" for Gerry Healey to direct the members of the Oxford Labour Group to the Cowley works factory gates; it represented a crude and ineffective application of the "class struggle". I think *that* is what Norman Birnbaum meant when he used the phrase "mindless militancy" with reference to the Socialist Labour League. He certainly did *not* mean it to refer to the "call for a unified strategy in industrial struggles", whether that call was made by the S.L.L. or Mr. Cousins, and it is dishonest of Cliff Slaughter to read Birnbaum's phrase in that way (*Labour Review*, July-August, 1959, p. 49).

Edward Thompson has grave doubts as to whether we can say that working class people are more consumption-directed

than they were in the past, and challenges my point that "consumption" represents anything like a "new" (qualitatively new) form of exploited relationship between Capital and Labour. I think, here again, that he is refusing to look at what is happening round about him. In the age group between 15 and 25 alone, the working-class "teen-age" consumers number 6,450,000 and have a "discretionary" spending power for "indurable" consumer goods of £900,000,000 (compared with a spending power of £450,000,000 in 1938). I have quoted other figures from Mark Abram's pamphlet on the *Teenage Consumer* elsewhere in this issue. What would the comparable figure for this age group, alone, be in the nineteenth century? My point was *not* that here lies the emancipation of the working class through reformed capitalism or anything else. I was only concerned to point out that this group, and a proportion of other working class groups (admittedly, less dramatically) see their chief relationship to Capital as that of the "consumer of goods".

What figures would compare, in a nineteenth century National Income and Expenditure chart, with the £400,000,000 we are going to spend on advertising this year? Why is it there now? What would compare, in the nineteenth century with the combined 10,000,000 circulation of the *Daily Express* and *The Mirror*, or with ITV Ratings? The Non-Conformist Chapel? *Clarion!* Cobbett on horseback? In one sense, seen through the "uses of history", the development of the "communications industry" can be understood as a gradual development. But we need the "uses of literacy", which Thompson under-rates, to explain the *qualitative divergence* between the "self-help" ethic of the chapel preacher, and the techniques of public persuasion today. The one challenged openly the motives and often the collective action of working people; the other, in Hoggart's phrase, "unbends the springs of action" themselves. There may have been periods of bourgeois complacency, of the aristocrats of labour, before, but there has been nothing that I know of to compare with the Age of Apathy which we have had since the war. I do not see how the "feel" of the Age can be described without reference to the qualitative changes which have taken place in the media of attitude-formation and opinion manipulation.

Socialism "here and now"

Cliff Slaughter does not deign to concern himself with any of these facts. His references are never to the world he and I inhabit—they are always to the sealed, inner categories of Marxist analysis. He objects to my saying that "the whole nature of private property has been revolutionised". Yet he makes no single reference himself to the implications for socialism, if any, of the development of the modern corporate firm, which *is* the heart of property-relations today. He objects to my phrase that "property has gone underground", although both he and I know that if you asked the average, informed member of a constituency Labour Party today to name ten crucial names in the "power elite" who command the class power based on property, he would begin with a relative small fry like Mr. Charles Clore, whereas he *ought* to begin with the "unknown" directors of I.C.I. or Unilevers or the Chairman of Lazard's Bank. Is Cliff Slaughter really interested in advancing a Marxist analysis of contemporary capitalism, or is he using the cover of "an outspoken debate on basic theoretical positions" to flick another sectarian whip?

In his view, "the busy concern of *ULR* with 'socialism in the here and now' is the worst manifestation of their ideas. For Marxists, the only contributions to socialism in the here and now are the objective tendencies of the capitalist mode of production . . . and the growth of a revolutionary movement" (*Labour Review*, p. 52). But what, pray, are "objective

tendencies of the capitalist mode of production" which he assumes everyone has at his finger tips? Does he really mean that it is of no consequence at all in the transition to socialism in Britain that the trade unions have advanced their strength in the teeth of capitalist resistance, that capitalism has been forced—however unwillingly—to accept the National Health Service? I know that a rampant capitalism has time and again swamped the advances made, that the Health charges are forced through, that the nationalised industries are annexed to private industry in all sorts of ways. But anything like a revolutionary consciousness of socialism and what it means will depend upon the developing consciousness of working people in their everyday struggles. It is cynical in the extreme not to see the advances which the labour movement *has* made as the growing points of socialism, the direct result of class struggle he is so fond of invoking, and the basis of any socialist appeal which he or I could make to working people today. Those things are before us, in the "here and now", inside capitalism. They *are* the "solid foundation stone for future advance"; and if they are not, I would like to know from what other roots a revolutionary movement is to "grow". There is no point talking in 1959 as if the last example of socialism that we know was the Paris Commune.

"If the concern for 'socialism in the here and now' amounts to the setting of tasks outside this building of the revolutionary movement, the consequences soon become in fact a support

for capitalism. . . ." (*Labour Review*, p. 52). This is, in fact, a simple piece of Stalinism, where the critics of the "regime" become, by a metaphysical sleight-of-hand, "objectively" the class enemy. It is part of the same process which in Stalinist jargon transformed Trotsky and the Left-wing Communists into "social fascists" and "class traitors", and whilst I am still surprised to find that the aspiring followers of Trotsky resort to it as a polemical tactic, I find in their use of it the very roots of "sectarianism" which Cliff Slaughter is so keen to refute. His article is not an "outspoken debate on basic theoretical positions" at all; it is a hatchet job.

That being so, there is not much future in going on. The S.L.L. pin their faith in the primacy of the "industrial struggle" and in the growth of a democratic centralist Marxist "movement". I believe that, until we can relate the concept of the "class struggle" to other forms of work as well as industry, we shall never link the different aspects of the struggle into a movement. Before Peter Fryer and Cliff Slaughter commit themselves to a democratic centralist organisation, they might leave a little room open for a few questions about the "democratic centralist" tanks Fryer watched swarm over the workers in Budapest. The gravest danger in the coming years could be that we fail to *make socialists*, and yet have "success" in building another socialist sect.