

'THE LEFT IN BRITAIN': A REPLY

by David Widgery

The quote which prefaces *The Left in Britain 1956-68*, so scathingly reviewed by Ken Coates in last year's *Socialist Register*,¹ was the key to my intention. It is William Morris's prophetic remark, 'Men fight and lose that battle, and then the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes, turns out not what they meant and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.' It was an attempt to trace backward some of those battles, some of those defeats and some inadvertent victories, undertaken in the hope it might illuminate the present dilemmas of the Left.

But if I have learnt any lesson from history, it is Don't Write It, especially about the recent past of the Left. First of all socialists in the full flush of the present just aren't interested; 1968 is old hat and '56 the Dark Ages. The new generations of the converted are, justifiably, more interested in the Commune than Grosvenor Square. And those who have first hand experience are, again justifiably, infuriated by newcomers tampering with their memories. Those socialist stayers of the generation of '56, who stood up against Stalinism when it was still intact, a world-wide, marble-faced orthodoxy, no doubt feel ill-tempered at us little squirts, parroting our post-Trotskyist clichés to the manner born, but with our knowledge safely out of books, spared the doubts and dangers, presuming to draw the lessons. They, as the bluesmen say, have paid their dues.

But respect does not require political accord. Nor does it make being politically flagged down by P.C. Coates any more pleasing an experience. Motorists may recognise the sinking sensation when an officer who has spotted a wing mirror which is, by general agreement, in a thoroughly disgraceful state, circles the vehicle, spotting infringements and defects that you didn't know could exist, discovers stolen spanners in the boot, unearths suspect cigarette ends and tells you as you remonstrate to 'Wipe that whimsical expression off your face'. Coates, having discovered several genuine errors, throws the book at me. So in defence of my own political jalopy, and before proceeding to the more serious issues, I must protest that *The Left in Britain* is by no means the intellectual disgrace Coates seeks to portray.

Some points of fact corrected by himself and other reviewers, I accept

unreservedly and thankfully. It is indeed the case that the Centre for Socialist Education was founded in **1965** not **1967**, than the Kessingland Camp was held under wood and not canvas and that Len Wincott is Len Wincott not Len Winnicott. Subsequent research suggests that Kessingland, though at one point advertised as 'Under canvas' was, in fact, provided with composition ply roofing. But some of the other points corrected with such flourish by Coates, I regard as either arguable or trivial and quite often both. The blurb writer's use of the phrase 'Stalin's tanks', denounced so splendidly by Coates, is a quite legitimate use of the figure of speech known as an eponym, certainly not good grounds to discount in their entirety my views on East Europe. To call Peter Fryer a 'life-long Communist' is not to exhibit some catastrophic ignorance about his circumstances, simply to suggest that he had been in the Communist Party since his youth.

In some cases over-zealousness leads to corrections which are themselves inaccurate. The Socialist Review group had **102** members in **1956**, not **201**, at the time quite a substantial difference. The Institute for Workers Control most certainly did evolve from a mainly small group discussion conference to one resting more on plenary sessions. Indeed it was bound to as its size increased so rapidly from the **500** at Nottingham in **1968** to the **1,300** at Birmingham in **1970**. The National Association of Labour Student Organisations (NALSO) was not 'dominated by the New Left from **1958**' unless the occasional appearance of Robin Blackburn at the back of halls amounts to domination. Its leading lights in its most active period like Alan Richardson, Martin Loney and Bruce Bebington could only be described as 'New Left' in the Daily Express sense of being under eighty and outside the Communist Party. C.L.R. James did have an organised following, although, according to Jamesian percepts, it was organised with great fluidity. Indeed an organised group arguing along the lines of James's celebrated pamphlet 'Facing Reality' took an active part in the two national conferences of the International Socialists in **1969** and traces of James's (emphatically state-capitalist) perspective can be found today in the journal 'Race Today' and in the 'Wages for Housework' groups.

I have no doubt that there are many factual errors, accidental rather than malicious, but I think this is inevitable in a pioneer survey covering a massive terrain. There are no handy source-books or reference tables to this subject. It is uncatalogued in most libraries and had to be assembled out of undated duplicated sheets and closing time reminiscences. Already more material has been published, including the spate of memoirs on the crisis in the British Communist Party in **1956**. I would encourage historians, amateur and professional, to take up the methods so fruitfully pioneered by History Workshop and seek out the veterans who still possess first hand experience. For when Coates accuses me of 'a shockingly

bad memory', it is his primary research which is lacking. I was **25** when I assembled the book and so **9** at the time of the invasion of Hungary. All I can remember with certainty about **1956** is that 'See You Later Alligator' got to No. 7 in the New Musical Express Top Twenty. But rather than get lost in more and more obscure points, I would simply deny the book is the intellectual shambles Coates conjures up, and suggest that in its important respects it is accurate, including a detailed chronology of the period in which no error has so far surfaced and extensive background notes which Raymond Williams was kind enough to call, 'despite their open tendentiousness', 'a useful Glossary and even more useful Bibliography.'²

There are, obviously, political disagreements and they should be treated as such, not conflicts between a Truth Coates mysteriously possesses and Inaccuracies that I deliberately propound. Perhaps the best place to start is the question of the contribution, if any, of the Trotskyist tradition, which Coates feels I have exaggerated, even though I stated emphatically it was 'more important for the ideas and traditions they could transmit than the activity they could undertake.' Trotskyism as a tendency originated in a reformgrouping within the Russian Communist Party based around Trotsky's suppressed critique of the Communist International's draft programme. The International Communist League, founded in **1930**, regarded itself as a legitimate tendency within the Comintern, unjustly expelled and demanding re-admission. Only in **1933** did the literally suicidal Comintern German policy and the blank refusal of the International to discuss its mistakes force the decision to found a rival international. Its only substantial following outside Russia was in the United States and Greece with tinier but real nuclei in Spain, South Africa and Britain. In general Trotsky's supporters were an uneasy mixture of longstanding communist industrial workers, now isolated from their original industrial base and younger intellectuals. There is some evidence that Trotsky only took the step of founding the Fourth International in **1938** as a desperate gamble made in the hope that a tiny but coherent anti-war revolutionary group might, as in the First War, emerge from the chaos as the agents of revolution. But if there was a Zimmerwald, there was to be no Petrograd. Trotsky, and effectively Trotskyism, succumbed to the terrible repression.

In post-war Britain, with the possible exception of the Independent Labour Party, Stalinist mythology was strengthened on the Left and was accepted by the Centre and Left of the Labour Party. To some degree Attlee's re-statement of the Labour Party's collectivist aims in *The Labour Party in Perspective* enabled the Left to accept the legislation of **1945-51** as the first instalment of a longer-term socialist transformation. The swift emergence of the Cold War conscripted and imprisoned what might otherwise have been more questioning attitudes inside the Communist Party.

As the fierce anti-Communism extended to the witch-hunting of the 'cryptos' in the Labour Party, many must have suspected that Trotskyism was a soft option which permitted one to be a Red without the risks associated with Communist Party membership. Orwell catches in relief many of these dilemmas from a revolutionary viewpoint although he resolves them in a somewhat pro-American direction.

It is only too easy to write off, with the kind of phrases Coates uses, these pioneers. They were exiles within their own class, seen as traitors to both sides of the Cold War, impaled on their isolation, fissiparous to say the least. They, above all on the Left, were defined by defeat, the rise of Stalin, the absence of successful proletarian resistance to Nazism, the crushing of the Spanish Republic and the global carve-up at Potsdam.

So what were the traditions they bore? It was above all a conception of socialism which was active, from below, emphasising workers control. It was an alternative to re-definition of socialism, by social democracy and Stalinism, as the extension of state ownership, planning and a 'progressive' foreign policy, a twentieth century proletarian utilitarianism which has more in common with Bentham than Marx but on which Stalin and Morrison might agree and the Webbs, who so abhorred the 1917 rising, could learn to admire. But there were other, more specific issues which brewed within the post-war debates of the British Trotskyist movement. Issues which became critical after 1956 if a way forward was to emerge. Between '56 and '68, certain groups of individuals and journals tried to answer these questions or alternatively sunk back to the pre-'56 orthodoxies.

What were the questions? The nature of the East European states, vigorously debated within Trotskyism, was and is crucial. For if they are socialist by virtue of the absence of private ownership and despite the lack of active working class participation in their creation in most cases, then we have to enlarge the criteria to the point when socialism means little more than industrialisation under state monopoly. Is the evident denial of the right to speak and organise a necessary cost of socialist advance? Or if the problem is the temporary usurpation of power by a group of bureaucrats, can they be overthrown by a revolutionary process in some ways less throughgoing than in the West? Are women more fully emancipated by virtue of their greater involvement in wage labour or more fully oppressed?

A second group of questions concerns the nature of the national liberation movements in the Third World. And these led into an evaluation of the potential for working class self-emancipation in the West. Was the post-war boom permanent and if so, why? Had alterations in the nature of the state and production incorporated the working class so subtly and thoroughly that proletarian uprising was no longer possible, as in the influential pessimism of Marcuse? Was the best revolutionaries could hope

for the success of an aggressive Left Reformism creating a crisis from which the Left could profit implicit, in the 'structural-reform' case? What was the direction of the Labour Party and the future of Left Reformism?

Most of these questions are now clarified by events. But in the period '56 to '68, they were still debates about potentials, although they had considerable strategic importance. On these sort of questions, the New Left Review had strikingly little to say. Orthodox Trotskyists, if they asked the questions, had orthodox answers and quarrelled about the labels. The Institute for Workers Control initiated an influential strategy for re-stating a muted case for proletarian self-emancipation but one which sought too many friends to have asked divisive questions. International Socialism did tackle some of them squarely and attempt to act on their conclusions.

The point is not to award prizes but to argue that had a wider measure of clarity been achieved then, the new problems, which arose after '68, might have been tackled sooner and with a greater active audience. As it is, many who were transformed by 1968 are now accommodating to pre-1956 institutions; Left Reformism, the Communist Party and orthodox Trotskyism. The 'Red Seventies' which Tony Cliff talked of *glibly*³ and which Ken Coates predicted in the last line of his 1970 essay have turned out rather *grey*.⁴

Looking in more detail at the intellectual contributions made by the various groupings, I can't really agree with Coates that I wilfully distort things. I particularly included extracts from the debates in the Left Forums and the polemic of the anti-Trotskyist, anti-Stalinists of 'The Reasoner' and 'New Reasoner' to demonstrate that the debate that unfolded in the late Fifties extended far beyond the Trotsky-Stalin conflict, attempting, as one of the Wortley Hall speakers put it 'Not to create a new centre of political power but to stimulate a new climate of socialist opinion.'⁵ The problems of creating such a climate were legion and E.P. Thompson has described them at some *length*.⁶ But I think it is fair to say 'The New Reasoner' was in some ways a rather conservative review, an intellectual holding operation which sought to re-assert some of the values and intellectual standards of communist intellectual life in the Thirties and Forties, akin to a de-Stalinised 'Modern Quarterly'. It broached some critical issues, notably on the politics of nationalisation and the welfare state, which we are only now catching up with. And the editorial line on the Labour Party is splendidly stringent. But, all the more so in the merged publication 'New Left Review', there is no overriding concern with working class self-emancipation. Labour is a legitimate and important concern but in no sense the central pivot. E.P. Thompson's eloquence on the potential of the working class in the face of the imaginatively analysed privatising forces in *The Affluent Society* here stand apart from the general tenor of early NLR. Indeed there is more

continuity between Thompson's magnificent *Out of Apathy* in 1960,⁷ Robin Blackburn's pitting of the Luton car worker's uprising against Goldthorpe's embourgeoisified proletarians in his 1967 essay 'The Unequal Society'⁸ and Tony Cliff's exuberant reflections on the May Events 'On Perspectives' in 1969,⁹ than the authors might like to admit. But generally in the early NLR it is the skill with cultural nuance and a stimulating but rather fickle alertness which predominate together with over-optimistic accounts of newly independent states and rather baffled sorties into labour and trade union life. There has been a lasting influence but its been mainly on a certain style of intellectual. Mike Kidron's view of an alternative emphasis still carries force; 'What is needed is an analysis of contemporary capitalism in terms of its impact on working-class consciousness, prescriptions tailored to the weakness and strength of class-consciousness today; in fact the recognition that class consciousness is the material with which we deal as socialists with a view to **transforming** it into a material force in its own right. Without this at its centre, socialist analysis loses its coherence and socialist programmes their reality.'" This may be an example of what Coates objects to in IS's tendency to be 'bored by practical discussions and prefer to talk about "consciousness" and other luminous abstractions', but it has relevance not only to the subsequent development of NLR but to several journals in the current renaissance of intellectual Marxism in North America.

For as regards the new New Left, there can be no doubt that from 1963 onward the Review has virtually created a field of academic Marxism and operated as most nimble intellectual provocateurs. Our bookshelves are now suitably enlarged but I'm not so sure our progress towards socialism has been that greatly advanced. In the tenth anniversary retrospective index published in 1970, only 9 of 130 articles deal with Britain, 5 fewer than those listed under Cinema.¹¹ Although there are many articles of exceptional interest, the kind of questions I have suggested required clarification in order to go forward as socialists with a perspective that fitted the needs of the Seventies are absent. And in that process something else has happened. Marxist theory has been turned into self-sufficient science, carried out by skilled intellectuals but in some way analogous to the workers' struggle. The implication seems to be that it is the job of the intellectuals to make the theory, the job of the workers to make the revolution and that what is wrong in Britain is that the latter are too backward to understand the former's instructions. For theory carried out on such a level of abstraction is in continual danger of becoming merely a hobby which can bear very little relation to any current political line. And since theory then never has practical consequences, shifts within it are made not in fruitful interaction with the real world but on the basis of new intellectual hunches. Perry Anderson has interestingly reviewed his own positions in *Considerations on Western*

Marxism¹³ in a way that seems to be moving towards orthodox Trotskyism, as embodied by the somewhat incompatible trio of Rosdolsky, Deutscher and Mandel. But the hundredth issue of the NLR concludes Marxism 'still has only the weakest implantation in their working classes'¹³ and that phrase expresses a sense in which the NLR's tradition of Marxism has become something over and above the working class, an alien thing that needs to be 'implanted' like some electrode into their ungrateful skulls. This approach would need to be firmly rejected even if it had tackled the real issues.

As for the IWC of which Ken Coates is himself a leading partisan, there is here no question of denying the definite impetus that the Institute has given the conception of workers control, forcing a response from the Communist Party (for whom the question raises considerable difficulties when applied to East Europe) and the Labour Left. This intellectual initiative has extended as high as Tony Benn and as far as the Australian Communist Party. Some weaknesses of the Institute's publications have been well reviewed by Richard Hyman in a previous issue of *Socialist Register*.¹⁴ The point here is not a failure to evaluate the changing nature of the state and the decline of political reformism, the IWC calls attention to both, but a reluctance to spell out the likely effect of these changes on the traditional left union leaders. And while I would accept the point made by Bob Rowthorn about Benn's programme for modernisation 'that many on the Marxist Left. . . took a rather negative attitude to the whole affair on the grounds that Benn's programme was little more than "an attempt to shore up British capitalism",¹⁵ revolutionaries in industry will only be able to profit from the upheaval that forcing through of Benn's programme would require, if they clearly grasp the political intentions of the 'state-capitalist' wing of modern social democracy. Here the Institute, in over-stressing Benn's radical aspect, are rather misleading.

The IS/SWP criticism of the IWC's approach has been frequently aired in a rather over-acrimonious debate, in which Coates' review of my book is, I suspect, a further instalment.¹⁶ The basic point, that the trade union bureaucracy is now a central element in enforcing wage policy and therefore can be in no circumstance be relied upon to pull us through, has been repeated to the point of tedium." The approach we have advocated is the re-building of an independent nationally linked rank and file movement, rather like the Minority Movement, organised at the workplace, mainly through industrial newspapers and workplace bulletins. It is then able to exercise its own power in struggle and is not simply in being to impress or improve or provide votes for full-time officials of radical hues. This means we face direct conflict with the leaders, right, left and centre of the unions we are campaigning to democratise. The IWC conception, while apparently more radical in its blue-prints for self-management, its propaganda for occupations and its reprints of Gramsci has, in reality, in

the late Sixties especially, tended to place more emphasis on influencing union leaders already in power.

Now if the initial growth of the rank and file movement in the Seventies faltered in the atmosphere of resentful passivity engendered by the Social Contract, the IWC has run into larger difficulties. Jack Jones, who graced the tables of workers control in the Sixties, was the very architect of the agreement which succeeded in reducing the class that could overthrow governments to a state of industrial docility which is the byword of the world financial press. Hugh Scanlon, who thought my book was 'so Left it was Right' has achieved some kind of a record by apparently siding with British Leyland management's attempts to lock out his engineering members in the Birmingham Leyland toolrooms. Benn is biding his time and unwilling to break with Cabinet loyalties except on what is now the diversion of the re-negotiation of the EEC terms. It is a rather poor heir to **Bevan** who clenches his pipe and flexes his chukka boots down at the workers co-op but who sits tight when the National Health Service is shredded by Healey's accountants.

By this critical account of the limitations of orthodox Trotskyism, the old and new New Left and of the IWC between '56 and '68, I don't wish to suggest IS somehow solved these questions. Simply to propose that a reader of the first 40 issues of the journal 'International Socialism' would see an attempt to get to grips with the strategically crucial issues; which has provided since **1968** the basis for a genuine break into a smallish independent revolutionary party as well as a further sixty or so issues of the journal and quite a body of books published by Pluto Press which it is frankly silly to call, as Coates does, merely 'a rather shrill, if also intellectually infertile, sectarian grouping'.

In this period IS stressed the role of state arms expenditure, now continuous rather than war-related, in achieving a temporary stabilisation of the propensity of capitalism's general rate of profit to decline. This is neither original in the fundamental sense, the importance of arms spending is noted by both Lenin and Bukharin, nor in the post-war context where the idea is first argued in the American journal 'New International'. IS also used the state capitalist conception originated by Cliff to account for the Soviet Union to explain the general tendency of the private owners of the means of production to be successively circumscribed by an alliance of the bigger companies and the state. There was an analysis of the shift in the locus of reformism away from social democratic electoral politics towards unofficial industrial action in Britain.

Much of this is now irrelevant, or requires clarification or enlargement, only part of which has been done.¹⁸ But it tried to pick the critical issues, to explain what the conflicts were about and come to operational conclusions. Where Coates might have a point is in the early Seventies where IS was rather prone to rest on its theoretical laurels. Here an

intellectual history of the period would need to look much more to the **Women's** Movement and some of the specialist groups of socialist historians, economists and philosophers for the original work. In particular IS has made rather heavy weather of creating a balanced analytic response to the modern feminist movement, despite its immense impact on our ways of thinking, feeling and organising. And this block, I suspect reflects not just masculine bias or the way the feminist tradition has been largely written out of socialist history but an under-developed analysis of the crisis in the service sector and a slowness in appreciating the changed importance of community and welfare struggles in this era of reformism without reforms.¹⁹ In this respect we need to re-examine the sexual politics of Bolshevik Russia, the **SexPol** movement in pre-Fascist Germany and the work of socialist-feminists active in the British Labour Party in the Twenties. And men need to learn again that in Trotsky's words 'In order to change the conditions of life, we must learn to see them through the eyes of women.'²⁰

But to move on to the latter part of Coates' review, which deals with the '1917 model' and the separation of powers, while some of the points are undoubtedly valid, the overall tenor seems to be a sophisticated variant of the old case against revolutionary politics, which attempts to prove that the insurrectionary overthrow of the capitalist state is now irrelevant or so hazardous to be unthinkable. He seems to argue that those whose conception of revolution rests on the breaking up of the present institutions of government, law, production and their replacement by wholly new forms of social institutions are naive Utopians or potential Stalinists. A whimsical Widgery winds up a vicious Ulbricht. For if 'the corporate interests of the working people can conceivably achieve a representation and degree of satisfaction' under liberal capitalist democracy, perhaps Coates is right to fear that 'if bourgeois democracy were rolled back in Western Europe' the results would be necessarily rightward moving. The Russian revolution and Bolshevism would indeed be irrelevant as a guide to action and the glimpses of workers' power we have seen this century would be no longer burning inspirations but noises off, inappropriate for this complex age.

My feeling is that, in this respect, the politics of Lenin remain extremely relevant, their appropriateness sharpened by events in Lisbon and Santiago rather than vitiated. Indeed it may well be, as Mandel observes shrewdly, that the politics of Lenin have yet to be fully applied.²¹ Revolutionary socialists need to insist that we stand for the destruction of the state apparatus not its peppering with working class personal, that a revolutionary process which does not settle accounts with that apparatus is digging its own grave, that there is therefore no parliamentary road to socialism, however energetically we may contest elections. Our socialism means a social revolution which transfers power to new organs of self-

government and recovers the possibility of an everyday democracy and politics which have been alienated from us into the forms of the bourgeois state. We will find ourselves arguing not, as fifty years ago in essentially the same debate, with the social democrats, who have long since abandoned the historical aim of working class power but with the Euro-communists who now occupy the political vantage points vacated by them. For the newfound enthusiasm for **political** rights in East Europe professed by the leaders of the French and Italian Communists is balanced by speeches portraying themselves as the Parties of Order and arguing for various species of Social Contracts, Pactes Communs and Historical Compromises. Eurocommunism signals a new era. Before, collaboration with the local ruling class was justified in terms of the global needs of the Soviet Union and therefore the local Communist Parties never permanently forfeited their place in working class struggles. Now the Europarties are doing the reverse, consciously distancing themselves from Russia and revolutionary politics in order to earn admission to the local power structure in a way that will inevitably put them in conflict with their own base.

In as far as I follow Coates' point about the separation of judicial powers within liberal capitalism, I think he has been sold the dummy which radicals of the bourgeoisie have always utilised against the socialists. This is to confuse the area in which democratic rights have been won by the working class, often by force or its threat, with the parliamentary and legal forms of that state. But what they call freedom and what we want are very different and that difference begins to show through once people begin to press to effectively use their 'rights'. The complex self checking and separated structures of capitalist legality can turn pretty briskly into mirages as the black youth of Notting Hill Gate, Islington and Lewisham, the Right To Work marchers, the Grunwick strikers or someone just trying to get decent compensation for industrial injury could soon testify. Certainly those people who bandy the word repression about in Britain in **1977** are abusing language. But on the other hand those socialists who wish to insert proletarians to make effective and just the existing structure only solve the problem of bourgeois democracy by collapsing into its arms.

I suspect that what Coates is really driving at with his fingerwagging about **1956** and the implications that I don't take seriously enough the Prague Spring is the valid point that it is too easy for self-declared Leninists to gloss over the anti-democratic measures taken by Lenin and Trotsky to defend soviet power in the early Twenties and rely too glibly on the maxims of the Marx of the Commune and the Lenin of **1917** on direct election, instant recall and average wages in the Commune-state to overcome the deeper habits of obedience and divisions of labour etched into us by capital's rule. It is important for revolutionaries to be clearly critical of the measures in relation to one-man management and the outlawing of

parties which were introduced when the leaders of the Left Opposition still held power. The subsequent half century of bureaucratic rule, East and West forces us to insist on clearer measures. As Reich put it 'The means of preventing the bureaucratisation of a living revolutionary organisation *in advance* must be sought as of *now*.'¹²²

Socialists need to emphasise more the rotation of functions, the de-centralisation of decisions, a conscious drive to overcome the divisions of labour **along** sexual and **mental/manual** lines. Such real democracy would require a shorter working week, different sort of architecture, much more accessible forms of information media, a new sort of education. But the technical possibilities are undoubtedly present to create this new level of political democracy. A media worker, just like a miner, can explain just how the present possibilities are being squandered by the existing productive relations.

If such a socialism seems a tall order, well of course it is. But the prospects for reformist socialism seem to be visibly narrowing and the awful warning of **Allende** hangs a gigantic question mark over those who argue the 'realism' of his methods. Certainly to see revolutionary advance as necessarily cataclysmic is to take a very pessimistic view of the potential of the modern working class. To refer, as Coates does to the Spanish Revolution between 1936-9, where new forms of work, government and social relations did flourish even in a republic fighting for its existence, as 'an odd moment in history' seems a little cavalier in a man who takes such a pride in such historical matters as the composition of the roofing material in NALSO summer camps.

There seems to me more force in the socialist-feminist objections to Leninism which argue that it was created in such stark conditions, shaped in such icy hostility to the Narodnik tradition and so fiercely puritan that it postpones too many of the problems which have to concern us in the there and now till somewhere After-the-Revolution. I think the modern revolution does need to break with 1917 in this sense, that it needs to see struggle against the divisions of sex and colour as part of the process of creating a socialist movement. The struggle for a new life, new forms of relationships, new forms of loving comradeship, a deeper cultural identity need to start now, not as some highminded effort to self-improvement but as a necessary means of sustaining our ability to struggle. Modern capitalism has means of penetrating and shaping our innermost identities which socialists need to be able to understand and deal with. The lack of such a strengthening dimension keeps many away from the Left, yet I suspect where it is present, socialist politics have blossomed. Here I think that Trotskyist critique of what Stalinism did to the meaning of socialism is inadequate and we may need to look harder at the ways of **organising** of the pre-1917 British Left, too easily written off as 'utopian' or 'syndicalist' by people quite unscathed by any knowledge

of those socialisms.²³

We certainly need to find forms of organisation which give confidence, encourage self-discovery and self-expression, which cherish the original, the loony or even the whimsical, for it is those qualities which give socialist propaganda and working class organisation the artistry which has to be a part of revolutionary politics. And while Lenin himself is a pretty useless guide, the Soviet experience in the Twenties, or what can be retrieved about sexual policy, art, architecture, design and collective life provides more vitality in ten years than the avant garde in the capitalist world have mustered in the subsequent 50. Although here the Seventies have already seen some important achievements.

It is surely some of these ideas that burst forth from the political Pandora's Box of the May Events and if I am rather over-fascinated with their impact on the British Left, I can't escape the feeling that Coates somehow rather resents that wave which sought to upset his generation's command of the definitions of the Left. But what was important about May was the simultaneous explosion of many separate time bombs which had been quietly ticking away through the Era of Affluence; the mounting boredom with skill-less work, the repression of real love and sensuality even as 'sexual freedom' grew to the scale of an industry, the unremitting banality of the mass media, the conformity of higher education. And in Paris, feelings felt first by those who had apparently done well out of that system spread across to the young workers and entered popular politics. It was here that the most vital elements of the old New Left found their echo, not the back pages of 'New Society'.

The May Events are now nearly ten years away and, in a Britain choked with bunting, where the Fascist drum beat can be heard again on the streets, thrilling optimism of the Prague Spring and the French General Strike seem still further away. Anyone foolhardy enough to write a history of the British Left since 1968 has my heartiest sympathies. And I hope, for Ken Coates' sake, they keep a keener eye on that roofing material.

NOTES

'How not to Reappraise the New Left', Ken Coates, *Socialist Register*, 1976. All subsequent Coates quotes from this unless stated.

2. 'Only Yesterday', Raymond Williams, *The Guardian*, 12 February, 1976.

3. T. Cliff quoted *The Left in Britain 1956-68*, (Peregrine, London, 1976).

4. Ken Coates, 'Britain: Prospects for the Seventies', *Socialist Register*, 1970.

5. Tom Kaiser, quoted *The Left in Britain*.

6. E.P. Thompson, 'An open letter to Leszek Kolakowski', *Socialist Register*, 1973.

7. *In Out of Apathy*, Stevens and Stevens, London, 1960.

8. Robin Blackburn, 'The Unequal Society', in *The Incompatibles: Trade Union militancy and the consensus*, ed. Cockburn and Blackburn, Penguin, London,

1967.

9. T. Cliff, 'On Perspectives', *International Socialism* 36.
10. Mike Kidron in a review of E.P. Thompson's *Out of Apathy*, *International Socialism* 2.
11. *New Left Review* 60.
12. *Considerations on Western Marxism*, NLB, London, 1977.
13. *New Left Review* 100.
14. 'Workers Control and revolutionary theory', Richard Hyman, *Socialist Register*, 1974.
15. Bob Rowthorn, 'Mandel's "Late Capitalism" ', *New Left Review* 98.
16. *International Socialism* 40 which echoes an older still polemic over the 1959 Hughes/Alexander 'A Socialist Wages Plan'. In general Coates is a little disingenuous about his past. He was, at one point, a rather eminent adherent of the Mandel Fourth International and, at the Wortley Hall conference in 1957 the minutes read 'Ken Coates (Nottingham) said Marxism was inseparable from struggle. Therefore the task of those present was to go forward to build a Marxist Party.'
17. The approach (which is prone to ad hoc modifications and occasional abandonment) are to be found in 'The Rank and File Movement Yesterday and Today', Ken Appleby, (*International Socialism* 83), Steve Jefferies 'The Challenge of the Rank and File' (*IS* 76) and Duncan Hallas 'The CP, the SWP and the Rank and File Movement' (*IS* 95).
18. For a debate on the validity of these insights see Chris Harman and Mike Kidron in *International Socialism* 100.
19. For an analysis of the problem see Martin Shaw 'Hegemony and Class Politics' paper given at the British Sociological Association 1977.
20. L. Trotsky, *Problems of Life*, London 1924.
21. Ernest Mandel, 'A Political Interview', Critique Communiste, 819 September, 1976, translated and reprinted *NLR* 100.
22. Wilhelm Reich, 'What Is Class Consciousness', Denmark, 1933. Reprinted *Socialist Reproduction*, London, 1971.
23. See Sheila Rowbotham and Jeff Weeks *Socialism and the New Life*, Pluto, London, 1977 whose delicate recreation of the sexual lives of the socialist movement at the turn of the century asks some penetrating but unstated questions of the present Left.