

## COMMUNIST REVIVAL AND CHRISTIAN OPPORTUNITY

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**A**FTER several years of decline, the British Communist Party is steadily growing in numbers and influence. The numbers involved are not, as yet, very great but the upward trend has been maintained for a sufficient length of time for it to be of some significance. The form it is taking and, more particularly, what appears to be its underlying causes, should however cause Christians to stop and think.

In common with Communist parties all over the West, the British party lost some twenty-five per cent of its members during the months following the Hungarian People's Rising. Among them was a high proportion of young intellectuals and some of its most promising younger leaders. The membership graph dropped sharply, then flattened out and more or less remained so until a couple of years ago when the Party began to recruit slightly more members than it was losing. Throughout the past year the graph has risen steadily month by month. Between early September and early November 1960, the Party's membership increased by one thousand. The tempo of recruitment increased too. Before November was through the figure was up to 1,300. This represents, approximately, a five per cent increase in total membership in three months. The numbers recruited may not be spectacular, but the rate of increase is probably just about as much as the Party can effectively absorb at the moment. One must remember that the aim is to teach and train each member to become not just one more Communist but a well-instructed Marxist who is also fitted to be a leader wherever he goes.

Side by side with this growth in party membership has gone a notable increase in that of the Young Communist League. There has also been a much-needed rise in *Daily Worker* sales. Party activity has increased significantly. Bigger and more successful campaigns in industry and popular agitations on social questions have been initiated. Printed propaganda, meetings, public lectures and Marxist study classes have all been stepped up. These in turn reflect, not only an increase in numbers, but a mood of aggressive self-confidence too.

A majority of the new members are young. They are drawn in the main from two groups: young workers employed in our basic industries, and students and young intellectuals. Most of the

remainder, the older ones, are either former Labour party militants and activists who have become disillusioned with their party's leaders and policies, or workers who have been attracted by the Communists' recent campaigns on such issues as housing and rents, or for higher wages and against redundancy in industry. The St Pancras agitation is a good example of the former, its campaign among workers in the motor industry of the latter.

For the Party to attract people of this type is not new. With the exception of the first brief period following the Hungarian People's Rising, it has throughout the forty years of its existence always drawn a certain number of recruits from among disillusioned and frustrated members of Labour's Left and workers who have been brought into contact with it through its campaigns. Not since the mid-'thirties has it made the appeal to young people that it is making today. Why do they come? Where does the attraction lie?

Many of the young workers who have joined the Party are employed (or unemployed) in such industries as railways, mines and engineering, all of which currently have their own particular problems. Unemployment, that old enemy of the working class and friend of Communism, exists, or is a threat, in each. Frustration clearly plays a part in the making of young Communists in these industries. It certainly plays a big part among the youngsters who are going into the Young Communist League. The decline of the apprenticeship system, the dead-end character of many of the jobs which working-class boys and girls are obliged to take, are exploited to the full by the Y.C.L. The League is voicing the understandable discontent of the type of young worker who is intelligent enough not to let his frustration drive him into becoming a teddy-boy or young gangster.

So far as these recruits to Communism are concerned, capitalism has little to offer them personally, despite full employment and our much-publicized affluence, and so, arguing from their own particular cases, they make a general condemnation of the system as a whole. At one time this might, of course, have simply turned them into Labour militants. Today, in these cases, it does not. They turn to Communism instead. They, and the other young workers now coming into the Communist Party itself, tend to be completely disillusioned with the Labour Party. Or, to be more correct, they never had any 'illusions' about it. It has never even occurred to them that Labour might have anything to offer young workers. They feel they have little in common with middle-class intellectuals of the Gaitskell-Crosland type. Labour's Left, they find, is so confused and so divided that it has no appeal for them either. The Communist

Party's campaigns make it appear to them to be the natural place for an intelligent young worker with an itch for action and who is looking for some group which will speak clearly and unitedly about the urgent issues of our day.

The Party's campaigns against the near-farce of civil defence, against N.A.T.O. bases and missiles in Britain, its well-organized deputations to Parliament and elsewhere on behalf of the sectional interests of various groups of workers, have also contributed to the idea that here is a militant alternative to a muddled and middle-class Labour Party. Whilst it is true that many workers become Socialists and Communists as a result of their own personal experience of capitalism in practice, it is also true that many others are attracted by something much deeper than the purely economic, 'bread-and-butter' appeal.

Throughout the 1930s Communism's greatest attraction for many lay in its condemnation of real, existing evils, its belief that a decadent capitalism, in the throes of its final crisis, had nothing to offer but unemployment, fascism and war. Side by side with this went its propaganda to the effect that only the Communists had history on their side. Capitalism was dirty and done for. Communism represented what was new and emergent, able as a consequence to offer hope to mankind. In this belief young students—some outstandingly brilliant men and women among them—fought and died with the International Brigade in Spain. In this belief, too, thousands of other intellectuals, young and not-so-young, joined the Communist Party or associated themselves with its Popular Front activities.

On the face of it, capitalism today is very unlike the system in crisis of the 1930s and so, one might think, the Party can no longer make these same claims, nor have this particular appeal. In fact, it is clear that many of the young intellectuals who are now being drawn in the direction of Communism and the new Marxist Left are coming on the basis of an appeal which is in many ways remarkably similar to that of the 'thirties. Now, as then, the Communists' criticism and condemnation of bourgeois society, as expressed in their public propaganda and in their serious theoretical discussions too, are moral ones. Not for twenty-five years have so many Communist writers written so much, in books, pamphlets and articles, about the decline of culture, the fatuity of our way of life, the falsity of our values, the hypocrisy and sham of our 'Christian' civilization.

Throughout the post-war years of full employment the voice of moral protest has been muted. It seemed that there was little to protest against. Moral indignation, which had always played an

important part in the thought and practice of the Socialist and Communist movements, was at a discount. Talk about a collapsing capitalism at a time when the standard of life of the majority of people was higher than it had ever been before sounded unreal. It seemed pointless to declaim against social injustice when most people would have to look very hard and long to find any of its victims. Life was not easy for the Communist Party. But full employment and our relatively high standard of life have led to the age of 'we never had it so good' and 'I'm all right, Jack'.

There were many sensitive people who felt at the time that there was something fundamentally ignoble about the 1930s, still more who see that that was so today. Now there are the beginnings of a realization that there may already be something ignoble about the 1960s too. With Hiroshima and Nagasaki not far behind us, and the threat of other and much worse Hiroshimas and Nagasakis overhanging us, the present growth of materialism, complacency and political apathy seem to thoughtful members of a new generation inexcusable and positively indecent. It is in this situation that the movement for nuclear disarmament has been able to grow and thrive. It is against this same background that a new Marxist Left has grown up and there has been a new trend towards the Communist Party itself.

In such circumstances it is not the worst type of young worker or intellectual who is attracted to Communism. Some of the things which the new Marxists are saying might well, and better, be said by Christians. In the past, most of the recruits to the Communist Party had already had some association at least with the orthodox Labour movement. Today, many are going to it direct. Almost all of these go because they feel very deeply that all is not right with our present state of society. They have recognized that there has all along been quite a lot to protest and be indignant about. For the first time in man's history, for example, he has the scientific and technological means to end hunger. Yet there are more hungry people in the world today than there were in 1945. Taking the global view, we still have poverty in the midst of plenty with contrasts as great as existed in the West in Marx's day.

Our precariously poised prosperity is based on a peace bought with nuclear weapons, the cost of which, diverted into constructive channels, might set the under-privileged two-thirds of mankind on the way to a better life. Our Welfare State and social security still leave some tragic pockets of forgotten men and women. Our 'greater equality' still does not prevent fortunes being made from take-over bids of dubious morality. It may be that the voice of protest should

be heard again. That there should be some who question whether all is really for the best in the best of all mid-twentieth-century worlds.

Many Catholics were ready to speak out loud and shrill against the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* on the grounds that this reflected a decline in public morality. They have not always spoken as loudly, nor with the same uninhibited enthusiasm, when the word 'hunger' was mentioned. Nor, perhaps, has their awareness of the real nature of our growing materialism been as acute as it might have been.

In these circumstances it is almost inevitable that some of those who feel themselves to be, or want to be, 'on the side of righteousness' and who are sickened by our present smugness are beginning to look outside Christian circles in their search for solutions to pressing problems. Karl Marx wrote about the 'bourgeoisification of the proletariat'. It may be that historians of the future will record that in this period in which we are living large sections of the workers and bourgeoisie alike became petty-bourgeois in their outlook and moral values. It is probably no accident that John Betjeman has become the popular poet of our time. *Summoned by Bells* is entertaining and whimsical. Betjeman's autobiographical poem charms the reader—or the listener who hears him on the radio—with the droll way in which he exposes, for example, the emptiness and futility of his life at Oxford. But it is entertainment, at the most, candid self-criticism with a tongue-in-cheek element about it, not social criticism.

Contrast Betjeman with the Auden, Isherwood, Spender, Rex Warner, Day Lewis of the 1930s. These, too, were popular poets. But they exposed the futility of an entire way of life, subjected society as a whole to their analysis. In its metre Betjeman's poem is curiously reminiscent of Sassoon. But not in content. In a few lines Sassoon could convey the whole tragedy of the senseless slaughter and the tragic hollowness of the lives of so many who died in the first World War:

'I see them in foul dugouts, gnawed by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,  
Mocked by a hopeless longing to regain  
Bank Holidays and picture shows and spats  
And going to the office in the train.'

The metre, I repeat, is similar. But there would appear to be little fear of lines like these turning up in Betjeman.

Absence of social analysis, exposure and protest in contemporary

life and literature is almost certainly helping to push some of the young intellectuals of the 'sixties in the direction of Marxism. A new Marxist Left which belongs neither to the Labour Party nor to the Communist Party has come into existence since the Hungarian People's Rising. Communist Party writers criticize it but do not condemn it outright. It provides an introduction to Marxism, a bridge over which young intellectuals can pass into the Communist Party itself. It has done much to create an atmosphere in which sensitive people can, by a process of evolution, finish up in the Communist Party despite what was done in Hungary and despite the less acceptable features of life in Communist countries. Its spokesmen are, in the main, intellectuals who left the Communist Party at the time of Hungary, not because they believed Marxism to be wrong but because they felt that Russia, and with it Communism in practice, was becoming too inhuman, buying speedy development at too high a price. Its strongholds are in the universities. You may see its followers in their scores, walking behind the banners of its journal *The New Left Review* when the marchers from Aldermaston swing into Trafalgar Square.

The movement's appeal has been based almost entirely upon the demand for nuclear disarmament and upon protest at the decline of moral and cultural values in a 'declining capitalism'. *Out of Apathy*, a book produced by a group of its leaders and intended as the first of a series, leaves its readers with the impression that we may, after all, be not so far from that inglorious, final crisis of capitalism which the Communists prematurely foretold in the 1930s. Our very affluence, accompanied as it is by the betrayal of the moral and spiritual values for which our society is supposed to stand, may, it is suggested, be but the prelude to the ultimate collapse. 'The New Left' quote as evidence of our social decadence the way in which our bourgeois society, against its own precepts, is guilty of precisely those things with which we charge the Communists.

Here is a typical, and in its own way telling, example of the way it goes: Defenders of the present system condemn Communism for its contempt for the individual and for what it does to the minds of men. But the thinking, the demands, the artificially-created wants of large masses of our people today are shaped and moulded by slick publicity and advertising men acting on behalf of Big Business. Unilever can spend £83 million on advertising—which is twice the amount spent by Government on colonial development and welfare. Its annual profits are considerably in excess of this sum. The individual who is at the receiving end of this high-power, highly-financed offensive has ceased, they say, to count as an individual.

Communism may talk about 'the masses', but capitalism today thinks only of 'the consumer' which, if anything, is an even more depersonalized concept. And 'the consumer', in the shape of the working-class housewife, is held in such contempt that she has repeated over and over again to her on television the scientific absurdity that a particular detergent—identical in almost every respect with other equally heavily-advertised detergents, and in some cases manufactured by the same firm—washes 'whiter than white'.

This making and moulding of public opinion, say the new Marxists, reflects too the false values and hypocrisy of our day. Ralph Samuel, in *Out of Apathy*, writes: 'Snobbery, excluded from public rhetoric in post-war Britain, has made a powerful return through the media of persuasion, where it is crossed with "status" anxieties, competitive striving and market promotion'. In the same book, E. P. Thompson declare that the immediate task is the 'elaboration of a democratic revolutionary strategy, which draws into a common strand wage demands and ethical demands, the attack on capitalist finance and the attack on the mass media . . .'. Mr Thompson was a prominent Communist Party member and writer before his defection. He left, not because he disagreed with Communism but because he disapproved of the way in which it was being applied in practice. His thinking remains close to that of the Communist Party.

The growth of this neo-Marxist group and, at a different level, the proliferation of numerous small Trotskyist bodies, are manifestations of the same mood which is bringing new members to the Communist Party today. The Party, which is an old hand at the game, is visibly drawing 'into a common strand, wage demands and ethical demands'. As its numbers grow, its organization is strengthened and its morale rises, we must expect its activities in industry to grow correspondingly. It seems possible that it may be helped in this by a deteriorating economic situation.

It is interesting to note that the Party is paying at least as much attention to the 'ethical' demands. Of course, Marxism being what it is, the two can always be brought together. Dr John Lewis, the Marxist philosopher, in *Marxism Today*, which is the theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party, wrote: 'Granted the ethical validity of our struggle for these ends, it follows that whatever is necessary to secure them becomes morally right too and partakes of the ethical quality of the chosen end'. A significant proportion of *Marxism Today's* limited space is now regularly devoted to the discussion of ethical and cultural values and to condemnation of the more indefensible aspects of our present way of life.

The Party is in no mood to let any opportunities pass. The establishing of new Left clubs and even coffee bars, the growing acceptability of Communists in university circles, are evidences of the emergence of a new, thoughtful, restless and politically-conscious group among the young intellectuals. Like others of their generation they are keenly interested in modern developments. But they are interested also in social criticism, uneasily aware that there is something rotten in our present state. And the Party is ensuring that they are not left unsatisfied. Courses of lectures organized in London during the period October to December 1960 have included ones on 'Marxism and Philosophy', 'Marxism and Art', 'Marxism and Psychology', 'Social Medicine', 'Marxism and Music', 'Marxism and History', 'Marxism and Literature'. There is plenty to suggest that Marxism is not for morons, it can provide solid meat for intellectuals.

The Communist students and young intellectuals of the 1930s included among them the Left professors, writers, scientists of the late 1940s and early '50s—and the Communist nuclear physicists, diplomats and other much-publicized 'security risks' as well. It was because the Christian protest of that period was muted, because Christians were in too many cases identified in their outlook with the paganized mass, that the moral and intellectual leadership was too often and too easily assumed by Marxists instead. If the same happens in the 1960s we shall surely have only ourselves to blame.

These beginnings of a new turn to Marxism have lessons for us which need to be learned now. It is not to our credit that the people who are most forcefully and insistently drawing attention to the evils in our midst are ones who are outside the Christian fold. Nor is it sufficient simply to try to laugh off the paradox of men who are in revolt against the materialism of our day turning to dialectical materialism in their search for an answer to it. Too many Christians have accepted these evils without even recognizing them as such. There has probably never been a more materialistic aim than that of 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Yet this has in effect been accepted by practically the whole of suburbia and most of the working-class, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

It is in accord with the Church's teaching that men and women should strive for social justice and that they have a right to a standard of life which enables them to live in decency and to be able to put something aside for a rainy day. There is nothing in the Church's teaching, so far as I am aware, to suggest that man has an inalienable human right to an ever-rising standard of life—least of

all when others are living in hunger, poverty and ignorance on the other side of a fast-shrinking world. It may well be that we need to get our own values straightened out. When we do this, and make them clear for all to hear, the questioning young men and women with active social consciences may begin to turn to an authentic Christian social teaching for inspiration instead of to Marxism. My own experience leads me to believe that no normal man or nation will, all other things being equal, knowingly choose Marxism in preference to Christianity. The trouble is that too often the other things are not equal.

## THE INNOCENT AUDACITY

### An Approach to St John of the Cross

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

**I**F one did not know their context, it would be easy to mistake many of the mystical poems of St John of the Cross for the most passionate declarations of profane love. Influenced in content and imagery by the *Song of Songs*, and in form and rhythm both by sixteenth-century Spanish court poetry and by traditional folk verse, the poems assimilate several traditions, several attitudes. In one of St John's songs between the soul and the Bridegroom, the Bride cries,

'My Love's the mountain range,  
The valleys each with solitary grove,  
The islands far and strange,  
The streams with sounds that change,  
The whistling of the lovesick winds that rove.

.....  
Deep-cellar'd in the cavern  
Of my love's heart, I drank of him alive:  
Now, stumbling from the tavern,  
No thoughts of mine survive,  
And I have lost the flock I used to drive.'

If the reader did not know St John's own commentaries on his *Spiritual Canticle*, it would not be difficult to assign such verse as this to the plane of physical love. The poem shocks because it is so