On strategy and tactics in relation to the state

Is socialism, however understood, to be achieved gradually, or all at one time? Is it to be achieved peacefully, or will violence be necessary? And if violence is part of any socialist change, is it a violence which the Left must initiate, or is it merely a defensive violence for which the Left must be prepared in the face of the inevitable counter-revolutionary terror of those who will oppose them? Can socialism come through the full utilization of existing political institutions (where those are already democratic) or by their democratization (where they are not)? Must those in pursuit of a democratic socialist transformation hold fast to the conventions of existing parliamentary democracy, or must they insist instead on the supplementation of parliamentary votes by extra-parliamentary struggles? (And if the latter, what exactly is the appropriate relationship between, and the relative priorities of, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles in such a democratic socialist transformation?) And in either case, is parliament enough, or does socialism require the creation of new institutions of popular representation and administration? If it does, what will the relationship be between the new state forms and the old? Indeed are the institutions and personnel of the pre-socialist state amenable at all to socialist control, or must they be ‘smashed’ as a central element in the socialist transformation? Is the existing state, that is, to be captured, democratized, extended or replaced?

On agency

Regardless of how it is to be achieved, is socialism the project of a class or of a whole people? If it is class-based, is the agency for its achievement the working class alone? If that class is central, what exactly is its membership and what relationship do its members have to other classes (both other oppressed classes and exploiting classes) and to other groups exploited in non-class ways (to women, in domestic production, to migrant workers, to Third World peoples, and so on)? And can even a fully mobilized and broadly-defined working class make a socialist revolution in one country, or must the project be international in scope and impact? Is it the agency of revolutionary change, that is, a world proletariat; and if it is, what is the relationship between struggles here and the pattern of national liberation struggles, peasant mobilizations and industrial unrest abroad?

On instrumentality

What kind of political organization, if any, is needed to bring the working
class to socialism? How is that party to be organized internally, and what is to be the scope and terms of its membership? What relationship is it to have to the class as a whole (does it lead, follow, educate, or merely sustain only the advanced sectors)? And how is the party to know when support for socialism is sufficiently strong for it legitimately to act? Must it wait on a popular majority, or act on a wave of industrial unrest, or on its own sense of when the seizure of state power can spark the fire of revolutionary fervour across capitalism as a whole? Is such a 'vanguard' role for a socialist party a prerequisite to socialist success, or a guarantee of its inevitable degeneration?

Given the existence of at least this range of questions, the scale of disagreement and division on the Left is hardly to be wondered at. Indeed the idiosyncracies of many tiny groups reflect the way in which it is possible to put together a set of answers which very few others on the Left still share, or even did. But to talk of idiosyncracies is also to imply a norm: and 'normal' packages of answers to these struggles did tend to emerge early in the history of socialist struggle, thereafter to persist. In fact, in practice it is possible to distinguish two broad traditions, around which socialists have gathered over the last century: a tradition of 'reform' and a tradition of 'revolution'; and then to notice a further division within the revolutionary current, as that current's internal development eventually set Communists and Trotskyists apart. It is possible to notice too that within each tradition disagreements persist, and developments go on, which pull sections of what were originally different traditions closer together. That is why the universe of socialist groups is so difficult to fathom when approached from outside and for the first time, in ignorance of its history and internal disagreements, and why therefore a brief résumé of that history is so vital if the contemporary situation of the Left in Britain is to be understood in full.

The tradition of reform has come to be associated in Britain with the Labour Party, but it pre-dates it by at least a century, stretching back through the radical wing of the Liberal Party to Francis Place in the 1820s and beyond. That tradition has always seen its constituency less in class than in income terms, seeking to recruit from the poor in an unequal society, and relating to the working class as it emerged in the nineteenth century primarily as just one major group which had hitherto been denied its proper political, social and economic rights. For radical Liberals the solution to the existence of widespread poverty and inequality lay through the democratization of existing parliamentary institutions and the application of pressure there for discrete reforms. In the first instance this was tried by lobbying Gladstone's Liberal Party; but by 1893 the ILP had been formed, convinced of the need to put working-class people into parliament to speak directly for the poor and deprived. At the heart of this tradition there has stood a powerful commitment to parliamentary democracy and its procedures, to the winning of popular majorities at elections, to the sending of representatives to parliament, and to the use of parliamentary power and the existing state machine to initiate and implement sets of social reforms. By 1918 the scale of reforms required was held by the Labour Party to be larger than it had thought: not just reforms within capitalism but its replacement by a socialist commonwealth based on the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. In practice, of course, Labour governments to date have fallen far short of this more radical goal, as I will show later; but the very regularity of that backsliding has called into existence and then sustained a tradition of left-wing politics dedicated to holding the Labour Party to its historic task, by winning the battle for socialism within the Labour Party. The present character and organization of the Labour Left are discussed in section II.

The alternative tradition was from the beginning sceptical of Labour parliamentarianism. It found its goals too moderate and its faith in parliamentary majorities too naive. Instead the revolutionary current within the socialist movement looked to dispossess the owning class through a revolution which would give industrial and political power to the workers. Parliamentary action was not enough for that. Indeed parliamentary struggle took the working class away from its central area of strength, which lay in class struggles around the accumulation process in industry, and helped to defuse working-class power by subordinating it to parliamentary timetables, procedures and rhythms designed to protect bourgeois power.

That revolutionary tradition was first consolidated by the SDF (the Social Democratic Federation) and the tiny Socialist League. Left-wing rebels broke away from the SDF to form the SPGB in 1904; and the whole revolutionary tradition gained a renewed focus in the Communist Party formed in 1920. The debates between the Labour and Communist Parties in the 1920s on the goals, strategy and tactics appropriate to socialism remains one of the clearest statements yet within the British labour movement of the choices faced by activists on the Left; and that debate continues now between the Communist Party and its own left-wing critics, many of whom are gathered in one or other of the various Trotskyist groups. For as the socialist character of the Soviet Union degenerated under Stalin, and as the Communist Party came to play the role of loyal defender of Stalinist excesses, a few revolutionaries broke away in the 1930s to form a tiny element in Trotsky's opposition to Stalin - an opposition which constituted itself as the Fourth International in 1938. It is this revolutionary current, tiny and divided, which remains the most visible face of revolutionary socialism in contemporary Britain. Developments in the Communist Party are discussed in section III, and Trotskyism in section IV.
Parties in Pursuit of Socialism

Of course it is always possible to argue that in comparing the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the Trotskyist sects we are not comparing like with like - that the very way in which the Labour Party dominates left-wing politics in Britain makes the rest of the Left largely irrelevant and certainly trivial. There is no doubt of the electoral unpopularity of the Revolutionary Left. Table 10.1 gives the votes for Communist and other Left candidates in the last five general elections, and sets those against the vote for Labour. The contrast is dramatic. So too is the formed size of party memberships. The Labour Party's individual membership at the end of 1983 was 295,344,3 that of the Communist Party just under 16,000 and that of the various groups discussed in section IV probably between 10,000 and 15,000.

Table 10.1 Electoral support for the Left

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Communist Party</th>
<th>Other Left parties</th>
<th>Labour Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>37,970</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>12,179,341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 1974</td>
<td>32,741</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11,639,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1974</td>
<td>17,426</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11,457,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>14,599</td>
<td>14,846</td>
<td>11,532,218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>9,115</td>
<td>3,932</td>
<td>8,437,120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But it is as well to remember that the picture is not quite that simple. It is true, as we will see, that the domination of the Labour Party means that all other groups on the Left have to decide how to relate to its politics. But it is also the case that the Labour Party is itself in deep crisis, with its vote tumbling at an alarming rate. In the resistance to Thatcherism, its leadership and its politics play only one particular part. Its MPs speak out, though often only ambivalently. Certain of its local councils offer serious and courageous resistance in defence of local services. Many of its members campaign in the unions, in the Peace Movement, and in public demonstrations against the erosion of jobs and welfare provision. But in those campaigns the Labour Party has no greater presence than does the rest of the Left as a whole. Membership figures are very deceptive. Figures are often inflated; and when they are not, only a proportion of the membership are likely to be active. One can only guess at what the proportion might be; but perhaps 10 per cent of Labour Party members are active (in the sense of going to branch meetings), perhaps 30 per cent of Communist Party members, and possibly 90 per cent or more of those on the non-Communist Revolutionary Left. If those figures are in any way accurate, that would give the Labour Party 29,000 activists, the Communist Party's 5,000 and to the Revolutionary Left's 12,000. And what membership involves varies considerably. There are campaigning constituencies Labour Party, of course, and there are CLPs dominated by Trotskyist politics. But in the bulk of Labour Party constituencies membership means nothing more than attending a very formal branch meeting once a month, and doing a bit of electioneering in April and in May. To be in the more dedicated of the revolutionary sects, at the other extreme, is to devote your whole life (and a considerable part of your income - Militant reportedly take £60 a week from supporters earning £10,000 a year) to party activity and direction, to sell papers on a weekly basis, to attend party meetings regularly, and to campaign and agitate in a variety of causes. The level of commitment required by parties of the Left differs enormously, but the Labour Party certainly demands least and the Revolutionary Left most. The Labour Party is not, in that sense, a campaigning party so much as an electioneering one. It does not even use its newspaper (Labour Weekly) as an agitating and recruiting document. It is the Revolutionary Left who stand outside Woolworth on a Saturday. It is they and the Communist Party who concentrate on extra-parliamentary struggle. And because they do, and because that struggle is so important, they too have a vital role to play in the creation of socialism in Britain.

The Labour Party

The Labour Party was formed in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee, and adopted its present name in 1906. Founded in a period in which the majority of union leaders and the bulk of the then limited working-class electorate gave their political support to the Liberal Party, the new organization of Labour brought together socialists unhappy with...
the programme of Liberal-Radicalism and union leaders increasingly frustrated by the failure of Liberal governments to protect their organizations from the concerted attack launched on them in the 1890s by both employers and the courts. So from the outset the Labour Party was a coalition, containing within its ranks not only outright opponents of the capitalist system but also large numbers of politically moderate trade unionists and social reformers. That broad coalition has persisted, sustained by the manner in which the disintegration of the Liberal Party after 1914, and the Stalization of the Communist Party in the 1920s, combined to leave the Labour Party as the only available political home for so many of the progressive forces in twentieth century British political life.

In terms of its own criteria of success – votes won and MPs returned – the Labour Party between 1900 and 1966 was extremely successful. Since then, and particularly of late, it has been less so, as table 10.2 shows.

The Labour Representation Committee saw its initial task as that of placing a distinct Labour group in Parliament to promote legislation ‘in the direct interests of Labour’, and that anchorage outside Parliament is reflected still in the internal life and organization of the Party. Under the terms of its 1918 constitution, the supreme policy-making body within the Labour Party is not the parliamentary group but the annual conference. MPs may attend that conference and speak from the floor, but they have no separate voting rights there, and are instead technically subject to a manifesto whose content reflects policy proposals adopted at successive conferences by delegates from the constituencies and from the trade unions – policy proposals whose implementation is supervised between conferences by a national executive committee of 28 members, 18 of whom are directly or indirectly chosen by the trade unions, and again on which MPs (other than the Party leader and deputy leader) have no automatic representation.

This set of constitutional arrangements, which are sharply at variance with those to be found in Labour’s main political rivals, has helped to keep two features of Labour politics in public view down the years. The first of those features is the complex relationship between the parliamentarians and the activists in the constituencies; the second, the equally complex relationship between leading parliamentary figures and the national trade-union leadership. For in fact as early as 1907 Labour MPs as a group made known their unwillingness to act as the mere cipher of conference, and thus struggled for parliamentary autonomy which has made the issue of conference sovereignty a regular feature of internal Party disputes. Particularly when the Party has been more union leaders has been systematically eroded by the many pressures operating on Labour Ministers; and because of not, and in the wake of their defeat of those Ministers, the reassertion of conference control has been regularly presented by internal Party critics as the way of preventing similar electoral defeats in the future.

Yet whether that reassertion has been successful or not has always turned on the attitude of national trade-union leaders to the Labour government that has just been defeated. For though on paper the unions enjoy enormous potential power inside the Party, through their capacity to dominate conference and the national executive committee, and because of their importance as sources of finance and sponsorship (they provide 70 per cent of Party funds and are able to use one-third of all Labour MPs), in practice union leaders have not been willing to leave policy-making to the parliamentarians except in those areas that impinge directly on the union function and except in those periods (after 1931, 1970 and 1979) in which they have found themselves in direct conflict with the industrial and economic policies of outgoing Labour governments. So in spite of the Party’s official structure, Labour politicians have generally found themselves free to take the initiative in the formulation of policy, but the existence of a constitution which gives supreme policy-making power to a delegate conference has also provided the opportunity and incentive for constituency activists to shape British political life indirectly, by the formulation of conference resolutions.

For the Left of the Party at least, those resolutions have, as often as not, been concerned with advancing the interests of ‘working people and their families’ and the slipperiness of that phrase, so current in Left Labour circles these days, is one index of the ambiguous relationship that the Labour Party has had, and continues to have, with the working class. In many important respects the early Labour Party was an ambiguous and uneasily working-class party. The majority of its early leaders, and the bulk of its early activists, came from the working class. Keir Hardie, its first national figure, had been a miner. Ramsay MacDonald, its first Prime Minister, was the illegitimate son of a Scottish crofter and a young housemaid. Many of its early MPs were former union officials, and the Party relied heavily on working-class votes. Indeed by 1945 the Party had captured the electoral support of nearly 60 per cent of the working class, three-quarters of its own electoral strength was drawn from that class, and
Labour had become the instrument by which the socially exclusive composition of the House of Commons had been significantly diluted. As late as 1951, 74 MPs had only received elementary school education, and all of these were there as Labour members.

Yet from the outset the Labour Party was keen to capture support beyond the working class, and to present itself as more than a class (or a union-based) party; and this preoccupation with the pursuit of the ‘national interest’, understood as policies geared to winning the middle ground in electoral politics, became even more acute in the years following the election defeat of 1951. Since 1935 the Parliamentary Labour Party itself has become increasingly middle class in composition – teachers outweighing miners as the single largest occupational group as early as 1945 – and Labour cabinets in particular have always shown (and increasingly have shown) a propensity to be staffed by former university students and professional people. The Wilson cabinet of 1969 contained only one (and the Callaghan cabinet of 1976 only three) former manual workers, and both had in addition only two other members who had come to political prominence after service in the trade-union movement. Moreover, four of the last six leaders of the Parliamentary Labour Party have come from professional backgrounds. This does not of itself, of course, demonstrate any automatic lack of sympathy with working-class institutions and political demands, but it does nonetheless signify the loss of those shared life styles and proletarian roots that were such a feature of the early Labour Party.

This bourgeoisieification of the parliamentarians has been paralleled recently by a similar social shift amongst Party activists in the constituencies, (a recent survey suggested that 57 per cent of all Labour Party activists were now in white-collar occupations) and by a loss of manual working-class electoral support. The long-term trend of voting loyalty has also run against the Labour Party fairly steadily since 1951 and acutely since 1966. Certainly the 1979 and 1983 elections made clear that large numbers of skilled workers could no longer be relied upon to vote automatically for the Party (by 1983 more skilled manual workers voted Tory than Labour for the first time since at least 1945). And by then it was very clear that the long years of boom and slump, the emergence of a large ‘salaried’ with potentially radical politics, the regular tension between Labour governments and the trade unions on wages controls, the persistent tendency of constituency parties to pick middle-class parliamentary candidates, and the long-established search by Labour cabinets for national respectability and the support of the floating voter, had all combined to weaken the traditional linkages between the Labour Party and its working-class social base.

In the early years of the Labour Party that linkage was consolidated around a particular programme. Before 1918 the Party restricted itself mainly to acting as a parliamentary pressure group for the demands of the unions, articulating as its programme the political demands of influential trade-union conferences and the conventional preoccupations of Liberal Radicalism. But in 1918, as we have seen, the Labour Party went further and adopted a socialist goal: to secure for the workers, by hand or by brain, the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production’. Though party policy in the 1920s remained moderate, the traumatic events of 1931 (when Ramsay MacDonald left the Party to lead a national government against it) prompted the Party to adopt a distinctive set of policies that were more obviously in line with this new aim, and which have since come to constitute what normally passes for ‘socialism’ in the British labour movement. That is, the Party committed itself to extensive public ownership, to the democratic state planning of private industry, to strengthening the legal and political rights of trade unionists and workers, to the creation of a welfare state and full employment, and to the redistribution of wealth and income in favour of the poor and deprived. That programme gave the 1945–51 Labour government its initial agenda, and it was defended as ‘socialist’ by left-wing elements of the Party in the 1950s and 1960s as the Gaitskellite and then Wilson leaderships retreated from it in favour of the creation of a high-investment, high-growth private economy that could provide extensive social services without large-scale income redistribution or tight state economic controls. Then, as the Left in the Party regained the initiative after 1970, the programme of the 1930s reappeared, modernized in its detail but in all essentials similar, to provide the set of proposals on which the Labour Party could go to the country in 1974 talking the language of socialism again, and promising to achieve ‘a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families’.

The radical nature of Labour Party promises at elections has been a consistent feature of Labour politics since 1918. So too has been the experience of frustration in office, as successive Labour governments have fallen victim to the powerful conservative forces at work in the society they would so drastically change. The failure of the 1924 and 1929–31 governments to solve the dominant inter-war problems of unemployment, industrial stagnation and grinding mass poverty were often explained away as a consequence of the Party’s lack of a parliamentary majority – both governments surviving only with Liberal support – and this thesis gained more credibly from the initially impressive performance of Labour’s first majority government, that led by Clement Attlee between 1945 and 1951. That government began life by taking a number of industries into public ownership (mining, railways, gas, electricity, the Bank of England, and eventually road haulage and steel), by continuing the physical planning of
The immediate consequence of this was the reappearance of old factional divisions within the Party, and the old call for the re-establishment of conference control. Left-wing forces inside the Parliamentary Party, unions and constituencies interpreted the events of 1976–7 as a betrayal of a viable socialist programme, and sought constitutional changes inside the Party which might prevent that betrayal in a Labour Government to come. Left-wing pressure created a momentum for change which replaced the parliamentary group’s monopoly of leadership selection with an electoral college giving a role to activists and the main say to the unions; and obliged each MP to present himself/herself for reselection to the constituency party at least once in each parliament. Though the Left also failed in 1980 to win NEC control over the manifesto, their campaign for internal change definitely strengthened left-wing influence in the Party, if not in the country at large, and inspired leading right-wingers to break away, to form the Social Democratic Party and to ally with the Liberals. Left-wing pressure also put men from the Centre-Left of the Party into leadership, first Michael Foot and then Neil Kinnock; and kept official policy (as specified by conference) on the economy, Europe and defence far to the left of any to which the Party had been committed since at least the 1930s.

But so far at least that is the extent of left-wing success within the Labour Party. The Left within the Party now has three main components: Trotskyist entry groups; a ‘soft Left’ organized around the Tribune group of MPs; and a ‘harder Left’ active outside the PLP, such as the LCC and the CLDP. Divisions within this Left coalition on how best to push for constitutional changes after 1979 brought a major split, with many Left Labour MPs refusing to support Tony Benn in the campaign for the Deputy Leadership in 1982; and those divisions, and that campaign, helped to destroy the electoral credibility of the Party in 1983, leaving it with its lowest absolute vote since 1935, its smallest share of the total vote since 1918, and its lowest vote/candidate since 1900. Now needing a 12.8 per cent swing to win the next general election, and standing in third place to the Tories or Alliance in 309 of the 650 constituencies, the Labour Party is currently weaker in electoral terms than at any time since the war.

This weakness is reflected in the policy stance of the new ‘soft Left’ leadership under Neil Kinnock, whose concern to build Party unity and popular support has already produced fudging and backsliding on nuclear disarmament and EEC withdrawal. It has also quietened the ‘hard Left’, whose policies have been thrown into disarray by the visibly deleterious effect on the Party’s voting base of their agitation after 1979. But left-wing groups remain active on and in the Labour Party. The main non-Trotskyist ones are: the Tribune group of MPs; the Campaign group of MPs; the ILP; the Labour Co-ordinating Committee; and the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy; and these (and the Labour Party Young Socialists) are discussed individually in the appendix, section VI.
The Communist Party

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was formed in conference in 1920 and 1921 as a loose and initially reluctant coalition of small revolutionary groups who were inspired to unite both by Bolshevik success in Russia and by their own faith in the impending revolutionary upheaval within capitalism as a whole. That early revolutionary optimism was destroyed in the working-class defeats of the 1920s, and by the consolidation of Labour Party support in the inter-war years; and as a result the CPGB not only began with a small membership (initially some 3,000–5,000 people) but it has remained small ever since. Although it has managed (as few other revolutionary groups in Britain have ever done) to establish close, even organic, links with local working-class communities in particular areas, even that linkage took time to build up – and with time, the politics of the tiny party changed in very important ways.

Like communist parties across the capitalist world, the CPGB ‘Stalinized’ between the wars. Organizationally it began to ape the Bolshevik model: becoming centralist, banning factions, expelling dissidents, and keeping tight leadership control on policy and propaganda. Stalinization also involved a subtle change in the relationship between Moscow and London. Whereas in 1920/1 both parties to that relationship agreed that the only way to defend Bolshevik gains was to spread the revolution westwards, by the 1930s that commitment to internationalism had changed into a simple ‘defence of the Soviet Union’, and into the subordination of party policy here to the dictates of Soviet foreign policy. By the 1930s the CPGB was a loyal acolyte of the ruling group in the Soviet Union; and altered its policy only when given approval by the Communist International (itself under Stalinist control). So the CPGB abandoned its initial anti-parliamentarianism to follow a ‘united front’ policy of cooperation with Labour Party members in the trade unions between 1922 and 1928, only to change its line sharply (fighting the Labour Party as ‘social fascists’) between 1928 and 1934, before returning to a policy of common struggle (‘popular frontism’) against fascism between 1934 and 1939. All these changes were dictated by the Third International, and the first two at least cost the Communist Party members and popular support. By 1930 membership had fallen to 2,500, and though it revived during the Popular Front period of the 1930s, it fell disastrously again between 1939 and 1941, when the Communist Party refused to fight against Hitler (seeing the war as one between imperialist powers of no concern to the working class). Only Hitler’s invasion of Russia changed that, brought the CPGB heavily into the war effort, and enhanced its popularity significantly. By 1943 it had 56,000 members, and in 1945 even two MPs.

Since then the CPGB has been in progressive decline, a decline which now seems to threaten the very existence of the Party itself. The problems faced by the Communist Party since 1945 have been enormous. It had to react after 1948 to 25 years of economic growth and prosperity, 25 years in which living standards rose and political conservatism grew, and in which the weight of the manual working class in the social structure steadily diminished. In addition, it has had to contend with a capitalist state that has used virulent anti-communism as the central legitimating ideology of its own regime, and with a working class wedded, at best, to Labourism and, at worst, increasingly vulnerable to the appeal of anti-socialist ideas from Conservatives and Liberals. The Communist Party has had to operate too amid growing dissension, divisions and repression in the Soviet bloc, living in turn through the shock of Stalin’s death, the events of 1956, the Sino-Soviet dispute, the invasions of Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1980), and the suppression of Solidarity in Poland. The impact on membership of all these things has been steadily corrosive, and latterly dramatically so. Membership fell to 30,000 by 1975 and to less than 16,000 by 1983. Active membership within those numbers also probably fell over time; and the size of the Communist vote certainly did. The Party contested seats in each general election with determined regularity, only to see its vote/candidate erode steadily – from 1,953 in 1951 to only 444 in 1979. Circulation of its daily newspaper in Britain also fell – from more than 30,000 to less than 15,000 between 1973 and 1983.

Party policy and internal disputes operated against that uncongenial background. The Party’s recognition of its limited short-term potential was evident in the first edition of The British Road to Socialism published in 1951. In it, the Party envisaged the establishment of socialism without civil war through a combination of mass extra-parliamentary activity and the election of a socialist majority in parliament – a majority put together on the basis of an anti-monopoly alliance and still under the direction of a transformed Labour Party. That programme (and the insipid electoral and industrial politics it inspired) was insufficient to stop a slow (and at times more dramatic) haemorrhaging of Party members through the 1950s and 1960s. In particular the Communist Party lost tiny groups of comrades to the new Maoist parties whose creation was inspired after 1956 by the growing conflict between Moscow and Peking, the force of Chinese condemnation of the Soviet bureaucracy as revisionist, and the visible moderation of local Communist Party politics. The tiny and highly sectarian world of Maoist politics in Britain lie outside the scope of this chapter, although the Appendix does list one Maoist group by way of example (the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain) and it is possible to come across others, not least the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) and its paper, The Worker. But Maoism has not made any major impact on the Revolutionary Left in Britain. Where Com-
munist hemorrhaged more significantly in the 1950s and 1960s was to its Trotskyist and non-aligned Left. The events of 1956 in particular (Khrushchev's secret speech and the suppression of the Hungarian revolution) cost the Communist Party at least 10,000 members, some of whom at least went into the Trotskyist groups or into the New Left. (On this, see the next two sections.) More importantly, the events of 1956 destroyed for ever the Communist Party's capacity to assert its hegemony on the Left. After 1956 it was no longer possible for many revolutionary socialists to see the Soviet Union as the model for socialism, and Trotskyist critiques of Bolshevism degeneration gathered stature as a result. Indeed, as a new generation of students and workers radicalized in the 1960s, it was the Trotskyist groups which grew steadily and the Communist Party which did not. The Communist Party settled instead into a ritualistic defence of old policies and traditional socialist strategies which could not prevent its progressive marginalization from mainstream working-class politics and from the growing if still tiny world of the Revolutionary Left.

Such a crisis in British communism - which it shared even with its larger comrade-parties in France and Italy - invited a common response; and that came in the 1970s in the form of Eurocommunism. Broadly speaking, the Eurocommunist position was one which argued that neither social democratic parliamentarism nor old-style insurrectionary politics were likely to take the Western European proletariat to socialism. Given the unpopularity of the Soviet model and experience, and the strength of the capitalist state and its supporting classes, the only route to socialism that was available in the West lay through the construction of a broad alliance of classes and strata opposed to monopoly capitalism. That alliance would have to be broad (taking in not just male manual workers, but also women in domestic production, ethnic minorities and other oppressed groups) and it would initially have to be democratic rather than socialist (not restricting itself just to the already converted or to narrowly socialist concerns). Moreover, to achieve that, the Communist Parties themselves would have to drop party claims to the monopoly of wisdom and power, and dispense with the dictatorship of the proletariat through the construction of a broad alliance of classes and strata opposed to monopoly capitalism. Such a coalition was possible if, and only if, Eurocommunists argued, won and democratized the existing state, and progressively shift the centre of gravity of popular consciousness towards socialism and of state power towards ordinary people.

The issue of Eurocommunism provoked bitter debates across the Communist movement, both here and in Western Europe as a whole. The appeal of Eurocommunism to Communist Party members trapped in a Left ghetto was enormous. It offered a third way between parliamentarism and insurrection, it suggested a new way of reaching potential support beyond the working class, and it laid out a stages theory of progress to socialism which offered a long-term strategy for even a tiny party. But it also had problems on which its critics were quick to latch. By breaking with insurrectionary politics, and distancing Western European communists from the Soviet Union, the Eurocommunist strategy threatened to lose what was distinctive about communism as a tradition, and undermined the legitimacy and value of the history of each party to date. Its commitment to a broad democratic alliance offended those communists for whom the working class, industrially defined, was the key agency of socialist transformation; and its promise of a plurality of political parties in and after the transition to socialism threatened the status of the Communist Party itself, and (in the face of a large Labour Party, as in Britain) raised the question of whether a separate party was actually needed at all. As Eurocommunism established itself, therefore, it brought in its wake a spirited defence of the Soviet Union, of workerism, and of the special status of the Communist Party as an organization and of Marxism-Leninism as a science.

The CPGB has been dominated by a Eurocommunist current since at least 1971, and the latest edition of The British Road to Socialism, adopted that year, showed this dominance well. Developing themes prefurged in the 1951 programme, the 1977 version documented the hegemonic nature of capitalist rule and the existence of contradictions (particularly gender divisions) which could not be reduced to a simple question of class. In such a situation, and amid growing international and local economic difficulties for capital, the job of the party, according to the programme, was to link the inevitable mixture of resistance and struggle in a broad democratic alliance against state monopoly capitalism. That alliance would have as its core the working class (both manual and white-collar) but should also stretch out to small businessmen and middle management, and to other social forces and movements: women, black people, Scottish and Welsh nationalists, welfare consumers, young people, pensioners, even left-wing elements in religious circles. The programme specified the central political job for the alliance as the 'democratization' of the economy, society and the state; and conceived the transition to socialism as a lengthy process requiring strong state support at each stage. It still gave the Communist Party a unique job in that mobilization, calling on it to offer a quality of political analysis and leadership which the Labour Party could never hope to produce. But the programme made no attempt to replace the Labour Party by the Communist Party; and looked instead for a Labour Party transformation under the pressure of extra-parliamentary mobilization in which the Communists would play a vital part. Yet the route to socialism was explicitly not just extra-parliamentary. On the contrary, The British Road to Socialism looked to an interplay of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles to win a popular democratic victory which could initiate and consolidate a long process of revolutionary change.

Such a programme was insufficiently solid on traditional communist
themes to inspire a breakaway by the old Stalinsts in 1977, into the New Communist Party*. It also produced very bitter internal wrangling between the Eurocommunists, a faction around the internal monthly journal *Straight Left*, a group around the journal *The Leninist*, and a more fundamentalist group based mainly in the *Morning Star*. The latter tend to minimize the importance of non-class issues and of social forces other than the working class, and want the Party to radicalize its programme whilst defending the ‘socialist camp’ with enthusiasm. Those around *Straight Left* called for unconditional support for the Soviet Communist Party and believe the party has followed a revisionist course since 1956, if not before. They deride ‘bourgeois feminism’ and other social movements, want to abandon the Communist Party’s electoral work in order to facilitate entering the Labour Party, and are (according to their opponents) ‘a CP mirror image of Militant’ (*Marxism Today*, April 1984, p.28). The group around the *Leninist* see the Eurocommunists as ‘liquidationists’, threatening the long-term existence of the Party as such; and they fought hard at the 1985 Congress to have party control re-established over the *Morning Star*, to change *Marxism Today* (the Party’s high-selling monthly journal) back to orthodoxy in place of its heavy Eurocommunist stance, and to toughen Party support for military rule in Poland. The Eurocommunist leadership of the Party survived all those arguments at that Congress – but only just. The vote on the *Morning Star*, for example, split 155 to 92, and that is just one indication of how divided the Communist Party now is, and how near to major schism it may actually be.

The non-Communist Party Revolutionary Left

Peter Sedgwick once wrote that ‘we are all Trotskyists now’ in the sense that an entire revolutionary generation have come to take largely for granted what were once classical Trotskyist positions shared by very few people on the Left; namely the identification of social democracy as an anti-working class, pro-capitalist force and of Stalinism as the expression of the conservative nationalism of Moscow’s rulers: ‘. . . and a firm commitment to the development of revolutionary politics conducted outside the framework of Stalinism and social democracy and necessarily on an international scale.’ However there are Trotskyists and Trotskyists, these days. Not all those that Peter Sedgwick had in mind would even call themselves Trotskyists, and certainly not all of them are affiliated to self-proclaimed Trotsky Internationals. The world of the non-Communist Revolutionary Left is one of immense complexity, and again it can be understood only if its history is known.

British Trotskyism, like Trotskyism elsewhere, derives from divisions within the revolutionary socialist tradition brought about in the first instance by developments in Russia after 1917. Those developments were constituted in part by a battle for power between individuals at the highest level of the new Russian state – a battle which Trotsky lost and Stalin won. But it was also a battle about the character of that new Russian state, and about the relationship of revolutionaries to it. By the 1930s Trotsky had become convinced that the revolution had been betrayed, that power had been usurped by a parasitic oligarchy, a conservative bureaucratic caste no longer interested in spreading the revolution worldwide. He had become convinced too that, though the job of revolutionaries was still to defend the Soviet Union against capitalist attack, the best way to do that was to build social revolution outside the Soviet Union and to work for political revolution in Russia itself. That in turn meant that he decided by 1938, required the construction of a new and disciplined international (a Fourth International) similar in purpose and design to Lenin’s Third International before it degenerated into a tool of Russian foreign policy. Only such an international would then be able to offer revolutionary leadership to a world proletariat radicalized by the inevitable war between imperialisms which would soon mark ‘the death agony of capitalism’.

The tragedy of post-war Trotskyism, of course, is that the war, when it came, did produce the revolutionary situation envisaged by the Fourth International. Instead, workers across Western Europe gave their political allegiance in large measure to the very social democratic and Stalinized communist parties against which Trotsky had railed, and in their isolation at the very margins of the class they sought to lead, the small groups of his supporters settled into a form of politics that came to have a very distinct set of strengths and weaknesses. The strengths were those Peter Sedgwick listed earlier: a sense of the nature of Russia as a deformed workers’ state, a wariness about bourgeois politics and a commitment to the revolutionary socialist mobilization of the working class. But because the groups were so tiny, and often overshadowed by less attractive features: a tendency to hang on to received dogma, and not to integrate into the social forces that they sought to lead, the small groups of his supporters often found themselves driven to split into even tinier fragments whenever any of this was tried, and an associated penchant for sectarian infinitesimalism and the protection of organizational integrity that was reinforced by the whole communist tradition’s propensity for vitriolic polemic in the style of Marx and Lenin; and a slowness to examine the relationship between the working class and other components in the coalition for socialism, projecting instead a ‘workerism’, even an ‘economism’ (a preoccupation with the wage demands and industrial struggles of organized wage-workers) which left them less able and willing to relate to the independent struggles of women, ethnic minorities and peace campaigners. Not all the groups shared these weaknesses to the same degree, as we will see, but they remain key features of the Revolutionary Left which militate against its growth. For the Revolu-
tionary Left has grown, and grown divided, to leave us now with a myriad structure of groups, splits and intense ideological disputes. As a result, each group now has its own place in that complex structure, its own pedigree and history, which needs to be understood as part of its contemporary politics.

To clarify that, let me move briefly through the history of the main groups involved, and say at this point that what we need to remember first is that from its official creation in 1938 Trotskyism has always seen itself as an international movement in which individual parties exist merely as national sections of an internationally disciplined world organization. By 1944 the national section in Britain of the Fourth International (technically of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International – ISFI) was a tiny group of less than 400 people calling itself the Revolutionary Communist Party. Contemporary organizations on the Revolutionary Left in Britain can directly/indirectly trace themselves back to that party, not least because key figures active now were also active in the RCP. These include Ted Grant (Militant), Tony Cliff (SWP) and Gerry Healy (WRP). The RCP was riven by internal disputes on the status of the Soviet Union (was it a deformed workers' state or state capitalist?), on the significance of Tito, and on attitudes to work in the Labour Party and the trade unions. These disagreements split the organization entirely. A tiny group around Ted Grant, calling itself the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), went into ‘deep enthrasim’ in the Labour Party, as we will see; and an equally small group around Tony Cliff broke with orthodox Trotskyism altogether to pursue their analysis of the Soviet Union as state capitalist. It is in their journal, Socialist Review, that lie the origins of the present SWP, as again we will see below. What we need to establish first is what happened to orthodox Trotskyism, in the form of ‘The Club’ – the group organized around Gerry Healy.

Healy and his supporters retained the official support of the ISFI into the 1950s, to the point at which Healy’s group (and the American SWP) decided to set up their own international (the International Committee of the Fourth International – ICFI) in 1953 because of what they saw as the ISFI’s over-optimistic reading of developments in Russia after Stalin’s death, and their associated inability to criticize fully the repression of the East Berlin workers’ rising in 1953. The ICFI remained an alternative Trotskyist international until 1963 when it too split (this time on whether the Cuban revolution was or was not a socialist one), with the American SWP rejoining the ISFI to form the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI). Technically the ICFI still exists, and the Healy group is its national section; but in fact it has no other overseas affiliates of any significance.

The Healy group spent the 1950s working in the Labour Party, and was saved from extinction by the arrival of 200–250 ex-Communists after 1956 and by some recruiting success among rank and file trade unionists in the late 1950s. By then ‘The Club’ had turned itself into the Socialist Labour League (in 1959) and was heavily involved in Labour Party politics. It was eventually driven from the Labour Party (and its Young Socialists) in 1965, and has operated as an independent socialist party since. It changed its name again in 1973, this time to the Workers Revolutionary Party. But whatever the name, the SLL/WRP remains notorious on the Revolutionary Left for at least two things. The first is the intensely authoritarian regime which operates inside the organization, and which has produced an endless series of expulsions and high membership turnover. The second is its associated sectarianism – its refusal to work harmoniously with other groups on the Revolutionary Left against whom it maintains a steadily vitriolic condemnation. Details of its present policies are included in the appendix, and the broad outline of the international Trotskyist structure is given in figure 10.1.
The USFI initiated its own new grouping in Britain in 1965, in the form of the International Marxist Group (IMG). This group, as the Appendix will show, attached less importance than other Trotskyist groups to the role of the working class as the vanguard of revolutionary change, and instead, and in line with USFI feeling on the question – concentrated its focus on student activism rather than on workers, looked to the Third World anti-colonial struggle as a catalyst of change rather than to industrial struggle in the First World, and proved to be as open to feminism as any Revolutionary Left group in Britain has yet managed to be. Initially wedded to the notion of universities and students as catalysts of revolutionary upsurge, the IMG quickly renounced entry work in the Labour Party to concentrate instead on Vietnam Solidarity work and on giving unconditional support to the Provisional wing of Sinn Fein in its struggle for Irish independence.

The IMG was always highly democratic internally, and escaped the propensity to centralism and expulsions so characteristic of other groups on the Revolutionary Left. It also attracted to itself many socialist feminists in the early 1970s, and as a result – and like the Communist Party – was active in many key women’s campaigns throughout the decade. It was also active in the search for ‘socialist unity’ in the mid 1970s, and its leading figures stood as Socialist Unity candidates in the 1979 general election. But the waning of student militancy, SWP intransigence in the unity discussions, its own lack of a working-class base, and the crushing defeat of Socialist Unity candidates in 1979, all left the IMG with serious problems and with major internal disagreements. Renamed the Socialist League, it too has now turned to entry work within the Labour Party, and has in the process lost a significant number of its members and much of the public profile which made it so attractive a focus for many revolutionary socialists ten years ago.

Throughout its short life, the IMG’s major competitors on the Revolutionary Left were two organizations whose pedigree stretched back in unbroken line to 1944–7 and the RCP. It found itself in competition in the first instance with the International Socialists, Cliff’s group which had grown from a handful in the 1950s to more than 1,000 members by 1968. The International Socialists remained in those years the most theoretically fertile and organizationally open of all the formally Trotskyist groups. They abandoned any obligation to defend the Soviet Union by dismissing it as state capitalist, adopting as their slogan instead ‘neither Washington nor Moscow but International Socialism’. That in its turn set them apart from official Trotskyism, which continued to see the Soviet Union and its allies as worthy of defence as deformed or degenerate workers’ states. IS also abandoned the short-term catastrophism endemic to official Trotskyism, and developed a theory of ‘the permanent arms economy’ to explain the long post-war boom. They developed too a new explanation of industrial militancy, by concentrating on the role of shop stewards in the face of an ‘employers’ offensive’ and a necessarily conservative trade-union bureaucracy; and they used this view of rank and file industrial strength as a way of underwriting what little remained of their official Trotskyism – namely a faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class and in the associated need of revolutionary socialist parties to concentrate their main energies there.

Yet IS was also sufficiently flexible in those years to throw its energies into the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and to involve itself (less easily, it has to be said) in support work on the question of Irish independence. Active inside the Labour Party until 1967, the International Socialists grew rapidly in the early 1970s, turning the organization into the Socialist Workers Party in 1976, and setting up rank and file newspapers in 15 industries in an attempt to politicize and link up struggles across industry as a whole in the expectation of the impending radicalization of the working class under a Labour government visibly in decline. Membership stagnated when that failed to happen, and the scale of the SWP’s rank and file newspapers was reduced accordingly; but the party still remains the largest revolutionary socialist party in Britain with about 4,000 members. Indeed it has to be said that it was the SWP’s commitment to this very growth that blocked the establishment of any wider unity on the Left in the negotiations of 1976–7. For the SWP remains committed to ‘unity in action’ (in individual campaigns) whilst resolutely opposing any move towards organizational unity between itself and what it sees as tiny and politically dissimilar groups on the Revolutionary Left. The Party has become more ‘Leninist’ of late, reorganizing itself internally to give greater control to its central leadership at the cost of expelling or losing many of its former leading figures. Traditionally bad on the question of feminism – it actually closed its women’s newspaper (Women’s Voice) in 1982 – the SWP, for all its lack of any official linkage with international Trotskyism, is today extremely orthodox on some of the defining themes of that tradition: stressing as it does the need for a vanguard party, and for concentrating its energies on the defence and advancement of the interests of the working class at the point of production in preparation for an upsurge of working-class militancy and radicalism in the crisis to come.

The WRP, SWP and Socialist League also faced a challenge from the much more secretive Revolutionary Socialist League, now entrenched in the Labour Party as the major Trotskyist group still committed to entryism of a ‘deep’ kind. By that I mean a policy of entering a party not as a raiding exercise (to recruit and leave) but as a long-term strategy of waiting for the crisis to open up the possibility of that party’s mass radicalization – a radicalization then to be achieved from within. The RSL began such an entryism in the early 1980s, committing itself to over 20 years of waiting for social democracy to ‘go into ferment’, from which to extract a ‘revolutionary tendency’. Using a theory of the labour aristocracy to explain
working-class conservatism, and a view of the PLP leadership as politically corrupt, all that the Militant Tendency (as the RSL became) saw itself as having to do was to wait for the crisis of capitalism to destroy the material basis of the first, and its own activism to expose the latter. Militant has always taken a highly sectarian line on other Trotskyist organizations, dismissing them as 'the sects' and as anti-Marxist; and it still tends to discount all non-working-class mobilizations (anti-racism, feminism, even the peace movement) as distractions and irrelevancies. Against them and the Labour Party leadership, the Militant Tendency poses its series of transitional demands while consolidating its place in constituency Labour Parties, using its newspaper, *Militant*, as the main vehicle for both processes. That consolidation has worked to a degree. For in the absence of any serious theoretical challenge within the Labour Party from the organs of the Labour Left, Militant has established its space as the Marxist current within the Labour Party, and has benefited from the general radicalization of Party activities in the era of Tony Benn. Though its actual membership size is difficult to locate, it has definitely grown dramatically of late; and its growth has been so successful in fact as to stimulate moves within the Labour Party to proscribe the organization and to expel its members. Its five leading figures were expelled at the 1983 conference, and individual expulsions periodically occur at constituency level; but this still leaves the Tendency with two MPs and with genuine regional and party strength, particularly in Liverpool and in the Labour Party Young Socialists. The Militant Tendency is now the best placed and most publicized of all the Trotskyist groups engaged in entry work within the Labour Party, but its organization, membership and policy-making processes remain necessarily hidden and difficult to locate. Informed opinion would suggest, however, that there could be as many as 5,000 members in the RSL and as many again as sympathizers in the Labour Party Young Socialists; and the latest published work on the Tendency that by Michael Crick – reports Militant's annual income at over £1 million and the number of its full-time workers at 140. If this is true, Militant now has an income in excess of the SDP and more full-time workers than the Liberals and SDP together.

These then are the main Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist groups and parties now active in Britain. From them, at various times and for a multiplicity of reasons, a number of other smaller organizations have broken away. Figure 10.2 charts the main routes of those divisions; and the particular policy stance of each is given in the appendix, section 6.

The non-aligned Left

Finally, a brief note on a non-aligned current on the British Left – one
organized around discussion groups and educational activities, and peopled primarily by intellectuals. These groups were at their most extensive in the late 1950s, when a number of ex-Communist Party members joined with university-based radicals to form New Left Clubs, from which to create and disseminate a democratic and humanistic socialism that was neither Stalinist nor social democratic. A similar initiative in 1968 produced a May Day Manifesto, an analysis of British capitalism and a suggested programme for socialist reconstruction. In similar vein, Centres for Marxist Education were established briefly in the mid-1970s in places such as Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle. The most recent example of this current is the Socialist Society formed in 1981.

The aim of the Socialist Society is to help to create a new socialist popular culture - to make socialism the common sense of the age - by educational and agitational initiatives, and by research and debate. The Society is open to socialists aligned to particular political parties and groups, and to socialists aligned to none. It came into existence because of a sense that Thatcherism was winning not simply the political battle for popular support but also the ideological battle for popular consciousness. That in its turn was seen as an indication of how weak the Left had allowed itself to become - weak because of the visibility of its own internal disagreements and weak because of the paucity of its own specific rejection of contemporary socialist alternatives. The Society saw itself as one possible part of the answer to that weakness. It offered itself as one arena within which the Left could meet together to discuss (and hopefully to resolve) some of its internal disagreements. The hope was that, in the process, the Left could work together to clarify problems of socialist transition and to prepare the material on which the case for such a transition could be generalized. In other words, the Society saw itself, and still does, as a catalyst for unity on the Left, which it interprets as involving four things:

1. the creation of a framework within which socialist intellectual work and socialist political activity can come into mutually beneficial contact;
2. the encouragement of political co-operation and debate among socialists in the Labour Party and those outside it, whether organized or not;
3. systematic efforts to develop the relationship between socialism and feminism, with the aim of creating a Left integrally committed to women's liberation and politically equipped to fight for it; and
4. a struggle against GB chauvinism and racism both domestic and international - against the oppression of minority nationalities and ethnic communities, and imperialist domination of the Third World.

In the event, the Socialist Society's highest ambitions remain as yet unfulfilled and the Society itself is still much smaller than first was hoped. Though it began work with hopes of rapid growth country-wide, the Society remains heavily London-based, though regional groups are active in such places as Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff, Brighton, Derby and Leeds. The bulk of the Society's work has gone into the organization of study groups, summer schools, conferences and publications; and current membership is probably no more than 500. Yet for all that, the needs to which the Society saw itself responding remain of vital importance to the Left as a whole; and the series of which this volume is a part is our attempt to make a small contribution to the project for which the Socialist Society was created - namely of turning socialism into the common sense of the age. That remains still a vital task facing the Left in the rest of the century.