

marxism and the new left

In the spring of 1967 Isaac Deutscher spent six weeks at Harpur College (now the State University of New York at Binghamton) as Distinguished Visiting Professor of Political Science. The following is part of a tape-recorded discussion with Harpur students which was published in the first number of New Left Forum, a student magazine which Isaac Deutscher helped launch. The other participants were Eric Davis, Allan Whiteman, Gary Wurtzel and Professor Melvin Leiman.

The first point Deutscher tried to make clear was how the so-called New Left considers itself different from other radical groupings of the past, and the content of its claim that it adheres to a pragmatic, non-ideological orientation.

Isaac Deutscher: The term "ideology" has different meanings in different languages and in different contexts. Even in English the terminological confusion reflects the mental confusion. A few years ago some writers proclaimed "the end of ideology." What did they mean? When one looked closely at their proclamation, one realized that what they wanted to

announce was "the end of communism and Marxism," but as this would sound trivial, trite and reactionary, they used a more respectable formula: the end of ideology. The great aspirations and ideas about the way to change society were old-fashioned and should be discarded, they maintained. When they proclaimed the end of ideology, they actually proclaimed the end of *their* ideology, their own quietism and reconciliation with society as it was. Among those "prophets" were various ex-leftists, ex-communists, ex-socialists and ex-Trotskyists.

We also have to consider the other sense of the term "ideology." One might say that Marx also tried to get away from ideology, but his was quite a different conception: it was the false consciousness, the false ideas, the fetishes which various classes of society make for themselves in order to veil, unconsciously, their own situation, in order to idealize their own position in society. In this Marxist sense the watchwords *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* of the French Revolution were an expression of ideology. The reality of the French Revolution was the crystallization of a bourgeois order of society. The ideological veil which covered that reality was "Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood."

When your ex-leftwingers proclaim the end of ideology, they say in fact: "I am going back to respectable society. I am no longer storming the fortress of the existing order." Some of you, on the so-called New Left, want to leave behind *all* ideology in favor of pragmatism. This means, in fact, that you are endeavoring to get away from great ideas about society and its transformation, and embrace pragmatism. But pragmatism is also an idea. I suggest that you are deluding yourselves if you think that by exchanging ideology for pragmatism you are "getting away from ideology"; no, you are only exchanging one ideology for another. Pragmatism says: "Practical success, practical benefit—that is my supreme test of the rightness or wrongness of what *I think*." But this is an ideological appraisal, and hence an ideology like

any other. By the way, have you anything to get away from? Have you had an ideology until now which you want to jettison? If you really are exchanging ideology for pragmatism, why do you call yourselves New Left—what then is “new” in your program? Pragmatism is almost as old as American philosophical thinking.

It is obvious even to the most casual observer that you call yourselves New Left not because you have a new philosophy, but because you want to be distinguished from the previous generation of Marxists, or Leninists, or Trotskyists; you think, quite rightly, that your elders have done badly and you want to make a new start. This sounds very tidy: new people make a new beginning and call themselves New Left. But in what sense are you the “new people”? You are young? Young people can be very old if they start with very old ideas, and surely this is a more important consideration than the age group to which you belong. I suggest that you have, first of all, to define what is the new idea you stand for. In what way are you opposed to your elders, and to which of their ideas are you opposed? If you just announce “this is the end of ideology,” you start from their own bankruptcy, and bankruptcy cannot be a starting point.

It is also obvious that what unites you, the New Left, is really an emotional alienation from, and opposition to, this self-satisfied, complacent, well-fed and yet stupid bourgeois society.

Whiteman: This dissatisfaction is part of a common denominator; so is pragmatism. But the main element is, I think, humanism.

Deutscher: Humanism has been for generations seen as the common denominator of all political movements, ideologies, religions, and parties, and this fact alone shows that it cannot be a common denominator. If you ask President Johnson whether he is a humanist, he will surely answer, “Yes, I am.”

Even Hitler would have considered himself a humanist; he treated only *some* segments of humanity as subhuman. How do you interpret humanism?

Whiteman: Humanism holds the individual human being as infinitely precious.

Deutscher: This definition is too vague and much too broad to have any meaning at all. "The individual human being is infinitely precious"—this is not a very new idea. It dates back to old Christianity or to old Judaism, if you like, but surely it cannot be the idea of the *New Left*. Why don't you call yourselves old Christians or old Jews?

Whiteman: The name was granted us.

Deutscher: Excuse me, a political appellation is not a name given at a baptism which, as a baby, you have to accept, and which, incidentally, as an adult you are free to change. "New Left" indicates a political attitude.

Wurtzel: By the term "New Left" we mean that group of our generation which corresponds to the radical groups of the thirties.

Deutscher: Here you are establishing a link and a break with the "old" left. You are its equivalent and yet you are different. In what sense is the New Left a counterpart of the radical groups of the thirties? They represented an opposition to the existing social order and an inspiration to overthrow or change that order. Do you want to change your society, and by what kind of society do you want to replace it? Do you see in social control and social ownership of the means of production a principle vital for your and other societies? In a word, are you socialists? I am aware that the New Left comprises those who consider themselves socialists and those who might be described as nonsocialist radicals. It is politically

very important, especially at this time in the United States, that they all should cooperate for certain limited objectives—in their opposition to the war in Vietnam, in their struggle for civil rights. But nevertheless this difference between socialists and nonsocialists cannot be viewed only as a slight dissent. It is a major division because behind it are two different ideals of the organization of society. It is quite plain that a socialist will see the question of war and peace in a different context from the nonsocialist. The latter will assume that the racial problems can be solved within the existing economic and social order. The socialist, on the other hand, will say, “We should try even within this social structure to improve as much as we can the lot of the Negro. But ultimately only a different type of society will bring about the disappearance of race discrimination.” The radical will say, “Perhaps another president will adopt a more sensible foreign policy and we shall not be plunged periodically into repulsive, unjust wars at one or another end of the globe.” The socialist will say, “As long as you have this social system, no matter what president you choose, you will still have imperialist wars waged by your country.” The difference in approach and conclusions of the socialist and the nonsocialist is quite fundamental: it reflects a divergent perspective and aspiration. You are shying away from these questions, and this only weakens you. You will have to thrash them out sooner or later.

Wurtzel: The New Left of today tends, perhaps reluctantly, to draw the battle lines at the oppressed minorities—oppressed racially and economically.

Deutscher: What is the meaning of “oppressed minorities”? Does this imply that the majority of this society is not oppressed? Do you consider the majority of the white workers in this country as not being oppressed?

Wurtzel: Yes, but there are different degrees of oppression.

Deutscher: In other words you appeal only to those minorities that suffer a kind of double or triple oppression. Obviously, these minorities respond more readily to any call for opposition to the powers that be. But no society has ever been changed when the movement for change could count only on minorities.

Davis: I see that the whole society feels oppressed, alienated, frustrated and dissatisfied with our distasteful and superficial culture.

Deutscher: You may not suspect it, but yours is in a way a very Marxist conception. Marx himself says that it is not only the worker's but also the capitalist's thinking and identity that gets distorted by the function he performs in society. There are passages in Marx in which he speaks, almost with compassion, about the capitalists who are also the victims of the system of which they themselves are agents. It is the system which makes both the oppressor and the oppressed a caricature of human beings. It is the basic material and political interest which causes the possessing classes to defend this system. The working classes may condone it, but they have no interest in maintaining it. They may help in this by a lack of comprehension and a false consciousness. However, by not making a distinction between the possessing and the non-possessing classes, between the worker and the shareholder, we are running away from realities.

Professor Leiman: We should perhaps keep in mind that there is an extremely high level of class consciousness in America—not, unfortunately, among the working classes but among the bourgeoisie. Let us assume for a moment that the New Left's aim is to change the present order in the socialist direction—and in this consists its link with the mainstream of radical thought of the thirties. There still remains a fundamental difference in the way of thought between the two move-

ments. The radicals of the 1930s believed that the working class, aided of course by the intellectuals, perhaps even led by them, would be the decisive element of change. As I understand it, the New Left, which received most of its early impetus from C. Wright Mills, abandoned this notion. And they abandoned it on the "pragmatic" ground that the working class did not seem radically oriented. The whole militancy of the trade unions was directed towards securing higher wages and better conditions: it was a bread-and-butter struggle, not a class struggle. From this the New Left concluded—and here I am speaking about the position some ten years ago—that since reliance cannot be placed on the working class as the main agent of change, we have to rely on other groups. On which ones? On the intelligentsia? Perhaps on the Negroes?

Deutscher: I knew Wright Mills very well and my last discussions with him shortly before his death did center precisely on this issue: which force in society is to give effect to socialism? He did not believe the working class would bring about a socialist society. But Mills's concept of the elite as the main agent of change begged the question. An elite of what? Of whom? An elite does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of the society, it is part of a class. But Wright Mills had moved very close to a Marxist position in many respects. And one should not go back, so to speak, to an early Wright Mills instead of benefiting from his intellectual experience and development. One should start at least from where he ended, not from where he began. The concept of the elite as the main agent of socialism appeals to you because you think it frees you from the need to analyze the economic and class structure of society. It envelops the whole big mountain in a fog, with the peak—the elite—sticking out clearly for you to see. You maintain that your New Left corresponds in some respects to the left groups of the thirties, but you want to improve on their performance—and there is certainly room

for improvement—but this does not mean that you have to reject their analysis of society, which is valid now just as it was valid in their time.

Davis: This economic and class analysis brings with itself a rigidity which the New Left wants to avoid. In the thirties there was a genuine opportunity for a real social revolution, but the left disintegrated as a result of ideological squabbles.

Deutscher: Here you are mistaken. The whole of history is full of “ideological squabbles.” Over thousands of years people “squabbled” over matters of ideology. There is no end to the ideological divisions in Christianity, in the Reformation, in the Catholic church, in the Moslem religion, in the Jewish religion, and in the political parties. All human thinking and all human organization is subject to differentiation. Whether you like it or not, “squabbling” is the stuff of life; do not be contemptuous of it. What to you is squabbling is nothing else but differentiation in thinking. You saw that some groups differed in their views and ended in an impasse, and now you want to avoid their fate. First of all, you have to consider whether they reached a dead end because they differentiated in thinking or for some other reason. In my view, the left reached an impasse precisely because it did not want to debate the divergencies in aims openly and frankly. The Communist Party did not want to “squabble” with Roosevelt, and it supported fully and uncritically the New Deal. From Stalin’s viewpoint—though not from the viewpoint of the American left—there were good reasons for that “peaceful coexistence.” The members of the CP from Marxists became Rooseveltians. Then the Communists did not want to “squabble” with Stalin, to criticize his policy, and therefore they allowed themselves to be turned into mere stooges of Stalin’s policy. In this way they committed moral and political suicide. They did not want to “squabble” with Stalin, nor with Roosevelt—and you will not be much wiser if you too shun ideological debate.

Davis: Why do you think there has to be a strict ideological foundation before the New Left can start being active? Can't ideology develop out of action?

Deutscher: I am not saying that you should not be active right now. I started from the assumption that socialist and nonsocialist radicals should cooperate in the New Left for definite purposes. You need not necessarily agree on all the issues with the fellow who marches next to you in demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. This we took for granted right at the beginning of our discussion. But before the Vietnam war we had the Korean war, and before that the Suez war. Is it not likely that we shall have another war after Vietnam? After all, we are students, so-called intellectuals; we are not interested only in our next anti-war demonstration. We are also interested in principles and prospects. Whither are we going? In what direction? Korea, Suez, Vietnam, civil rights, racial problems, dissatisfaction with our complacent consumer society: are all these not only part of a much bigger issue with which we ought to be concerned?

I am not a little uneasy about another aspect of the New Left. The New Left is confined mostly to students and intellectuals. I derive great satisfaction from our meetings. Only a few years ago, during my previous visits to the USA, I had no common language with university youth. They were either indifferent to political and social affairs or highly reactionary and chauvinistic. Today I have much sympathy for students of your age group, but I am worried about the confusion in your minds and about your conceit, and about your shirking the really great issues, and also about your isolation from your society. You sow your wild oats within the campus, but you have no missionary zeal to carry your message to people outside the campus.

What in fact is the campus? It is only a bus in which you spend three, four or five years; then you take your final exams, you get off, and look round for a job. New people get on the bus. One can, in the company of fellow travelers on

the bus, be very radical. But after all, you are not going to solve the problems of your society on the journey between two bus stops. Any political movement which bases itself only on students is characterized by a basic political and moral instability. The students now play a very big role in various countries all over the world. Don't forget that behind the slaughter of several hundred thousand unarmed and defenseless communists, men, women, and children, in Indonesia, the driving force was the students. In this country the students are, from my point of view, on the right side of the barricades. But I remember also a time when the students were in the vanguard of fascist movements in Europe. I remember the students in my native country who vented all their political energy on forcing through the segregation of the Jews in the University of Warsaw. The role of students is transient. They are not a stable element in society; they are, if you allow me to use this despised term, ideologically unstable. Students can be very good vanguards of fascism or very good vanguards of the New Left, or even very good vanguards of communism in some circumstances. I am uneasy because I knew your predecessors—those who either favored McCarthyism or viewed it indifferently. And I do not know those who will come after you onto the same campuses. I am concerned with moral and political continuity in the development of any given society.

Your present broadly based cooperation on the campus gives you the illusion of being self-sufficient. How much continuity and stability is there in your opposition to the treatment of the Negroes, to imperialist wars abroad, to the violation of civil rights? As long as this opposition is not based on a stable class in society (I shall explain what I mean by a stable class in society), it is largely ineffective, no matter how important it is at the present moment. Have you asked yourselves why you are so ineffective? Precisely because you are active within the confines of the campus and during the short spell of your university "bus ride." You will soon disperse and, so to speak, dissolve in your bourgeois milieu: you will

have your families, your jobs, your careers, to look after. Now you are unattached—you are like kites that fly into the sky without any ropes tying them to the earth. Very soon you will feel the rope. You do not express just your own particular moods; you express the mood of your class in opposition to your class. Unlike your parents, who are tied down by moral commitments and conventionalities, you are unattached and express strongly, volubly and loudly all the disgruntlement and frustration which at heart your own parents feel (even if they will not admit it to you). When you say that you do not believe in the workers being capable of bringing about the change in the present unsatisfactory order of society, you really vent nothing but your parents' lower-middle-class (or middle-middle-class) attitude towards the workers.

Davis: But the trade unions in America today are just interested in a ten-cent-an-hour wage increase. The only radical group the New Left appeals to is the lumpenproletariat.

Deutscher: Lumpenproletarians don't change society. If the basic classes change society, then the lumpenproletarians may follow them. But when I speak of the working class, I do not have in mind the trade unions, which are only a bureaucratic outgrowth of the working class. I do not even have in mind the older workers, who have been corrupted and demoralized by this society and are the victims of this society. They remember how desperately badly off they were in the thirties. Now they are a little better off, so they gaze at their televisions and ride in their cars. But these crumbs from the table of the affluent society do not satisfy you and they do not satisfy the young workers. Have you tried to talk to them? How do you know that they are not as disgruntled as you are? As disappointed and frustrated as you are, only with far deeper wounds hidden in them? You start from the premise that because you are on the campus you are intelligent, sensitive, the *Schöngeist* who really sees how bad this society is:

and you think the boy who spends his life at the most monotonous dehumanizing job at the conveyor belt does not see this?

You are frustrated by the ineffectual character of your opposition to the things you loathe. Why is your opposition ineffectual? You are intellectuals, and your main weapon is the word. Your protest cannot be anything else but verbal, and verbal protest wears itself out by repetition and does not lead you anywhere. In order that a protest should be effective, it must be anchored in the realities of social life, in the productive process of a nation. Forty-odd years ago the dockers of London went on strike against the British government and refused to load munitions for the White Armies fighting against the Russian Revolution. You cannot strike and refuse to load munitions sent to Vietnam. Here the Marxist concept may be useful in explaining your own position. You are outside the productive process. You are confined to verbal protest—and this is important. “In the beginning was the word.” You should go on with your protest, but it will be effective only if it can pass from the word to the deed. You are not capable of the deed, but the young worker is—provided you move him—because he *is* right in the middle of the productive process that sustains the existence of society. You are effervescently active on the margin of social life, and the workers are passive right at the core of it. That is the tragedy of our society. If you do not deal with this contrast, you will be defeated.

The other group of people with whom you work, and should continue to work, the Negroes, are also a minority on the margin of the process of production. Their possibilities are also marginal and verbal; and I am not sure that they don't talk often in racial terms instead of class terms. Just as the contrast between your activity and the passivity of the white worker is one of the incongruities of your social life, so there is another incongruity between the isolated activity of the Negro and the indifference of the white worker.

Davis: We are all too aware that the campus is not society. But we still need techniques more than we need general over-all ideological pronouncements.

Deutscher: No one can prescribe “techniques” for you. Try to establish a spiritual and intellectual contact with those young workers who are inclined to think, who can read popular books about social affairs and want to understand what is going on around them. We shall then reopen the discussion on the “agents of change” in your society. In the Russian Revolution the students played an important part: they were the messengers who carried the idea of socialism out of the university halls to all classes of society and especially to the working class; and in this they proved both valuable and effective.

My criticism of the New Left is caused precisely by the anxiety that so much idealism, fervor and good intentions may be wasted if the New Left fails to find its correct way and direction. You have a link and you want to break with the left of the thirties; but you still have a great deal to learn from them. And, first of all, you cannot run away from the fundamental problems of society. Those very rudimentary Marxists of the thirties learned no more than the ABC of Marxism. Then came Stalin and turned the ABC into hieroglyphs. But Marxism still is a great store of knowledge, which you will be ill-advised to ignore. In the last two or three hundred years of world history was not Karl Marx the most influential thinker? Whose work has had a greater impact than his? All your mass media, which work full steam to dull your wits and stultify your mind (and which are so distasteful to you), drum into your head that Marxism is obsolete; and ninety-nine percent of the New Left takes on a supercilious attitude and echoes: “Marxism is obsolete.” And yet, if I may paraphrase a popular English saying: never have so many talked so much about a thing they knew so little. You do not have to accept Marx, but before you reject his ideas you should read him, acquire the knowledge, and then think

independently. And there is no need to be too utilitarian and “apply” Marx to the United States, or to Europe, or to Russia.

Davis: The New Left has the feeling that Marxism was corrupted, and this revulsion is caused not only by the Russian experience.

Deutscher: It is precisely the Marxist method that will help you in analyzing your revulsion against Marxism as it has been “applied” hitherto. Stalinism was not “contained” in Russia; it had its unfortunate impact on the labor movement in your country, and it distorted the beginnings of growth of Marxism here as elsewhere. Your earlier American Marxists were not perhaps as creative and inspiring as those that Russia, Poland or Germany produced. But if you read their old writings, you will still find a great deal of ideas which illuminate the present-day American scene. America has its own tradition of socialist thought; nothing in history begins *ex nihilo*, and the world does not begin with the New Left. Half a century ago there were also young people in revolt, and you have no lack of revolutionary tradition to link up with. But every reaction against tradition is also linking up with it.

Your predecessors of half a century ago had to contend with a society in full dynamic capitalist expansion, while you are witnessing a degenerate capitalism which can expand as imperialism only. You are also aware of another paradox of your society: the more it expands economically, the more, in a sense, it seems to shrink culturally. And you are just as impatient and disgusted with the poverty amidst plenty as you are with the complacency and self-satisfaction of the gadget-minded, acquisitive bourgeoisie. But do not delude yourselves that your aim—“participatory democracy,” or, as you yourselves put it, “that each individual should have a say in the decision-making process”—is anything more than a

vague and meaningless slogan. It implies that you want to participate in the management of society as it is; but the society as it is excludes you from participation by definition. For this, a new form of society is needed. And when you proclaim the end of ideology you also implicitly accept the dominant ideology of the very society which excludes you from participation, the very society against which you are in revolt.