

Class conflict or decline

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T was a lad named Pontius Pilate who put the time-honoured, but unanswered question, to the God-man (not the Dalai Lama): "What is truth?" The short and simple answer is, of course, truth is what is true. That, you may say, is answering one problem by presenting another.

Well, let us consider this. The ancient Greek philosophers sought to get at what was true by the method of dialogue. What might be called the search for truth through contradiction. One put forward a proposition, another contradicted it, and out of the ensuing discussion a new value in the search for truth emerged. That, at any rate, was the idea. And talking about the idea brings us to Hegel.

Hegel was attracted by this method of the dialogue and he saw it, as he believed, operating in the realm of human progress. Ideas, he contended, generally accepted as expressing what was going on, in nature as in human society, sooner or later were challenged by opposing ideas. Out of the conflict of the new and the old, the unity of opposites, came something different from both but containing values peculiar to each.

Marx, in turn, was attracted to the importance of dialectic as presented by Hegel, but was quick to realise that ideas didn't come out of the void. Ideas were, and only could be, generated by natural phenomena of which man and his associations were part. So he applied the dialectic to natural phenomena and gave us dialectical materialism.

It may be of interest to note here that the ancient prophet Isaiah did a bit of groping after the dialectic. In his day the limit of our sight upward, what may be termed our "vertical horizon", was looked on as a firmament—the roof of the earth and the floor of heaven. The occupant of the top floor liked nothing better, on a pleasant Sunday evening, than to look out of the window and have a chat with one or another of his chosen people. He, like the "desiccated calculating machine" Gaitskell, and before him that dear Christian brother, William E. Gladstone, believed in the "good neighbour policy". Here he was, having a chat with Isaiah, wherein, amongst other things, he had this to say, as reported in the 45th chapter, verses 6 and 7:

"I am the Lord, and there is none else." That's straight and to the point. No nonsense here about three in one. "I am the Lord and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things."

So there is Isaiah trying to find an explanation of natural phenomena and the behaviour of his fellow-men, and he finds it in an invisible overlord, half god and half devil, a combination of good and evil. The unity of opposites.

The Materialist Conception of History

Marx saw that the dialectic, or progress through contradiction, applied not only to natural phenomena, but also to human society, and this enabled him, and his great collaborator Engels, to provide us with the materialist conception of history. In connection with this, Engels says in the preface of the 1888 English edition of *The Communist Manifesto*:

"The *Manifesto* being our joint production, I consider myself bound to state that the fundamental proposition which forms its nucleus belongs to Marx. That proposition is: That in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organisation necessary following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; that the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class—the proletariat—cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class—the bourgeoisie—without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinctions and class struggles."

Attempts have been made by "disprovers" of Marxism—and there have been a legion of them,

all sooner or later themselves disproved by events—to present Marxism as a species of fatalism. Nothing could be further from the truth, as a study of that “fundamental proposition” will show. Man is active all through the piece. Man makes a change in the mode of production and is then faced with the task of readjusting social relations to bring them into harmony with the change that has taken place.

The aristocracy of Rome, in the days of the Empire, drew tribute from many lands. This enabled them to maintain a slave system of society that ultimately led to the most appalling degeneracy and the most fearsome and disgusting orgies. The “Revolt of the Slaves” led by the great historic gladiator Spartacus, struck a heavy blow at its rotten foundations, and this was added to by continual risings on the part of the non-slave plebeians of Rome. So much was this the case, that Constantine gave up Rome and built himself a new capital in Byzantium—named after himself Constantinople.

The Empire by this time was well on towards decline. The removal of the government from Europe left that great area a prey to all who were strong enough to seize a slice for themselves. But for these there was no tribute from other lands—they had to find other means of maintaining their pomp and their mercenary armies, and the only means available were the peasants who tilled the fields. Each baron claimed the peasants in his area as his own, and so from the decline of the Roman Empire, with its slave society, came feudal society with serfdom as its basis.

In the towns, freemen and merchants formed their Guilds and worked at their respective crafts and the distribution of merchandise. The craftsmen were always considering new designs or new and simpler methods of producing the goods they were interested in, while the merchants were equally concerned with finding opportunities for extending the markets that provided them with profits and wealth.

Many long years ago I read Sismondi's *Rise of the Italian Republics*. One striking remark, above all others, has always remained with me. “The merchants of Italy”, he said, “knew how to turn national disaster into public good”. The meaning of that he made clear. When their feudal lord was defeated in war, that was national disaster. But he returned bankrupt and had to approach the merchants for a loan. This they were willing to provide him with, on one condition, that he signed a new charter, calculated to

increase their political and economic power. This was public good.

Thus it is clear that the process of change is carried on by mankind changing or expanding the mode of production and distribution, and with every such change, great or small, seeking to adjust social relations in line with such changes.

The Church

But there was not only the rise of feudal society from the ruins of the Roman Empire; alongside of it, and as a moral and religious sanction for it, there arose the Roman Catholic Church. This Church is essentially a feudal product. Its whole construction was, and is, an exact parallel of feudal society. Every stage of feudal society, from the lord of life and death down to the toiling serfs, is to be found in the structure of the Catholic Church, with the same rigid code of obedience, imposed from top to bottom. It was God's Church, and no one must question it, and it was God who put the feudal baron in his castle and ordained the serfs to till the soil at his bidding, and no one must question that.

But despite the ruthless power of the barons and the power of eternal damnation of the Church, there were those among the serfs who were prepared to challenge the power of both. The peasants' revolts in Europe and in England are sufficient proof of that.

But a new class was rising in, and around, the towns. The merchant class, using the skill of the artisans, were transforming themselves into the early stage of capitalism. Grouping the artisans together, production took on a character that demanded an ever-widening and freeing of their markets. But to secure such marketing the power of the feudal barons had to be broken, and the innumerable tolls and taxes eliminated. The Church sanctioned feudalism and the masses followed the Church. So, before feudalism could be overthrown, the Church that gave the system its blessing had to be discredited and replaced.

Thus came the Reformation, with the overthrow of the feudal Church, as a necessary preliminary to the overthrow of the system it protected. Freedom to trade was the watchword of those who broke the power of the feudal barons, freedom of worship was the watchword of those who overthrew the Church. Every man had a right to make his fortune in his own way, every man had a right to go to hell in his own way. The Church anathematised the Reformation

and still does, but as James Connolly pointed out, now blesses the father of the Reformation—capitalism.

But, it may be asked, how comes it that a feudal Church is able not only still to exist in capitalist society, but is actually increasing its influence while the “Free” Churches are in decline?

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Catholic Church suffered heavy blows. In every country where capitalism was advancing, “free” religion rapidly advanced, and Catholicism just as rapidly declined. By the middle of the 19th century it was about down and out in the most advanced countries in Europe, having mass support only in the more backward countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Most of the literary giants of the 19th century were agnostic and all for intellectual liberalism. And it is worth noting that the Church damns such liberalism as the road that leads to Bolshevism.

Well there, in the 19th century, the Protestant Churches wielded very great influence in the life of the people, in the trade unions, and in the case of the “Nonconformist conscience”, in the House of Commons.

The Basic Contradiction

Free trade required a free Church and there they were sailing along, apparently, in smooth waters. But the basic contradiction in the system was bringing a new and powerful force into existence, heralded by the publication, in 1948, of *The Communist Manifesto*. By that time, the workers, having got rid of the Combination Laws, were steadily building their trade unions to protect, and where possible advance, the interests of their members. Now Marx was setting a goal before them that he, and the disciples to follow him, would keep incessantly before them. This was one great factor that was to affect the relation between the Catholic Church and the various sections of the Protestant Church.

The other important factor was the change that was taking place in the character of capitalism. In the second half of the 19th century the individual industrialist was giving way to monopoly—the last stage of capitalism, as Lenin puts it. In the early stages of this century, the last stand was made by the political representatives of the “Industrialists”. Free trade or tariff reform was hammered at from one end of the country to the other, and brought the Liberal Party a resounding victory for free trade in 1906. Two more elections and two more victories in

1910, and then on to oblivion as a great party.

Monopoly took over and the basis for Liberalism vanished—a party intended to represent the workers took its place. Free trade has no meaning for monopoly capitalism, therefore there is no particular value in “free” religion. The religious sanction of a given system must have sufficient influence over the people to make them accept the existing social relations, and the mode of production and distribution responsible for these relations as ordained by God, and therefore to be accepted on pain of eternal damnation. Where is such a religious sanction to be found? Certainly not in the scattered and competing sects of Protestantism, although some of its clergy have a sort of subconscious realisation that such influence is essential for their survival, and talk more and more of allocating special clergy for preaching the gospel to workers in the factories. There they have no influence whatever. Different altogether with the Catholic Church. It has a very great influence with its members wherever they are employed. Very early in the advance of monopoly this was recognised by the monopolists and by the Church. The monopolies, great baronies with huge financial and industrial power, as distinct from the territorial power of their feudal prototypes, see in a monopolised religion the reflection of their own system, just as the men of the Church see in monopoly capitalism a system in many respects similar to that which nurtured its early growth.

It is the only Church that can instruct its members not to vote for or associate with Communists, with the threat of excommunication and the consequent eternal damnation if this command is disobeyed, and, over a considerable proportion of politically active members, get it accepted. Thus it is a Church claiming monopoly of the Christian religion, and as intolerant of opposition as the financial monopolies which dominate the system of society it now defends.

Another, not so important, factor, but nevertheless one that had an advantage for the feudal Church is the fact that the bourgeoisie, snobbishly fawning before titles, failed to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution, but carried over into capitalist society a whole mass of royal and aristocratic parasites. Thus the shadow of feudalism still remains, and, with even more contemptible snobbery than that of the bourgeoisie, Labour and trade union leaders clamour for this shadow of a long dead past.

Yet we are told by the Prime Minister that the class war is now obsolete. Let us look at this.

First a simple example of the unity of opposites and the generating of ideas.

Fire and water, we are told, don't mix. They are opposites. But try mixing them. If you have a nice fire going throw a bucket of water on it, and out of the unity of opposites you get neither fire nor water, they both disappear and you get steam. Mankind early on discovered the use of fire, for softening metals and for heating purposes. But it took tens of thousands of years and a terrific advance in the mode of production before it was possible for James Watt, or any other for that matter, to get the idea of using steam as a method of propulsion.

The unity of opposites! Slave-owners and slaves, feudal barons and serfs, profit-hungry capitalists and wage-earners. Such relations inevitably involve conflict, but "the class war is now obsolete". That implies something that has recently happened. It is *now* obsolete. It wasn't obsolete in the past but now it is. That's the story Church and State must try to get across.

But if, as is admitted by this phrase, there *was* a class war, then it could only arise from a deep, fundamental contradiction that implied the unity of opposites. If it is now obsolete, then the contradiction must be solved and we must be living in a classless society. Is this the case? What was the basic contradiction of capitalist economy that gave rise to the class war? Co-operative production on the part of masses of workers, and private ownership of the goods they produced. Has that been changed? Have we now brought production and ownership into harmony—co-operative production, and co-operative, or common, ownership of the wealth produced?

Clearly we haven't, the basic contradiction is still there and will continue to give rise to other contradictions, that will only be solved by conflict. Several of these are already before us—the 40-hour week, higher living standards, higher pensions, the banning of H-bombs which, while they may appear to be of value to the bourgeoisie in the fading desire to talk from strength to the economically advancing Communist countries, have no value whatever for the working class. Then there's education, rents, and automation, and of great importance the liberation struggle of the colonial peoples. All of these engender conflict in one form or another.

Mr. Macmillan is wrong, totally wrong; he was simply giving a classic example of "the wish is father to the thought". Although it must be said that so far as Gaitskell is concerned the class

war is ended. At any rate he has no intention of participating in it. The Tories openly declare that they are opposed to socialism and for the preservation of private enterprise; Gaitskell says the same thing in different language.

Labour, he says, believes in a mixed economy, there is room for public ownership and private enterprise. No Tory would object to that; they and the old Liberals were nationalising and municipalising when the Labour movement was in its infancy. Post Office, telephones, telegraphs, Admiralty yards, gas and water.

What does this "mixed economy" give us? Instead of Parliament presenting a unity of opposites it has become a unity of similarities. No conflict—a dead House, in face of the struggles going on outside. In the last Parliament the smell of death was evident. Not only the people outside but even the Members inside had lost interest in its debates. Mr. Bevan, we were told, had the mortification of speaking to almost empty benches in a rapidly mortifying House of Commons.

What to do about it? Set up a commission to examine into ways and means of applying artificial respiration? Opinions were sought from Clerks of the House, from old Members and from new. A long bulky report was prepared which received widespread notice in the press. It was all wasted time and waste paper. Not a useful suggestion of any kind was forthcoming. The unity of similarities means that there is only one party, the opposition is a fake and can never hope to put real life into its work.

What are Politics About?

If Mr. Macmillan were right, and the class war obsolete, there would be no need for two parties and long sessions of Parliament. Administration would become more important than legislation, and because the class war had faded away in Parliament, but not outside, there wasn't one serious item of legislation presented before the electorate during the recent election. What a farce it was in that respect, although in another it was very important. For, regardless of the issues, or issue, a study of the results will show that the great mass of the workers—there were, of course, defections—voted against the Tories, against the party they recognised as the party of their enemies, the capitalists and landowners. These workers haven't reached the conclusion of Macmillan about the class war.

In the election of 1951, I remember reading the report of a Press conference addressed by

Morgan Phillips, during which he said, "If the Tories want to fight this election on the price of tea, we are ready and rarin' to go". Just fancy that! Two big parties, maintained at heavy cost, in the one case by the ruling class, in the other by the working class (with, recently, a few millionaires throwing in their quota), and they go to the expense of an election on the price of tea.

What of 1959? They didn't even have the price of tea to fight on. Only when the election campaign got going was there thrown into the arena the promise, by Gaitskell, to raise pensions by 10s. per week. Could we, or could we not, afford such an administrative change? Two big parties and that's all they had to quarrel about. All that time and all that money spent and no decision arrived at. Now a new House of Commons is meeting, and the only so-called legislation that will be presented to it will be a series of administrative changes. There cannot be anything other of any real class importance.

Of course, when they got the "Queen's Speech" prepared by the Tory Government, a wide-roving debate followed. In this, one or two Members struck a note, echoing, in a mild way, what is going on outside; they even challenged Macmillan's statement about the class war, but there was nothing real in it, for there is nothing to fight about—no real conflict, no fundamental contradiction between the parties, the only possible condition for producing a live Parliament.

When the class war is ended, when there is a classless society, then there will be no long sessions of Parliament. Members will meet to work out new forms, or modifications of old forms of administration, and then to return to their areas to see that the party there and the trade unions and management, of which they are part, put them effectively into operation.

Classless society means a society where class contradictions have been eliminated. What then of the dialectic? In the first instance the contradiction between the power the people possess and the carry-over from the old order of artificial distinctions—that of titled and non-titled can be easily dealt with—the lords and ladies will be laughed off the stage.

Higher education for all will take the place of higher education for the few. The professor, as William Morris foresaw, will be able to take a job at the bench, while the man at the bench may take a turn at lecturing in the university.

While that process is going on, the ever-increasing expansion of production and the means of production brings about a contradic-

tion that is already manifest, not only in the socialist countries but in certain circles in the capitalist countries as well, the limitations of their surroundings in relation to the terrific power that is now at mankind's disposal.

It is no accident that the Soviet Union is ahead of America in space research. America, like Britain, concerned with maintaining the old order, has been concentrating most of its energy in devising means of destruction, and is only now, because of the lead the Soviet Union has achieved, started the process of concentrating its forces on this new and far-reaching field of endeavour. Britain hasn't even started in the race, and it's clear that America wouldn't be as far advanced as it is, but for the fear of being left far behind by the great socialist country.

Capitalist Contradictions Remain

But the dialectic favours the Soviet Union. It has eliminated the class contradictions and is rapidly advancing towards the elimination of artificial contradictions. These remain with America and with all capitalist countries. They give rise to conflict within each of these countries, and while these conflicts go on the contradiction of the limitation of their surroundings cannot assume the importance that it does in a country free from such conflict. Their means of production, and their education, technical and scientific, cannot advance at the rate that it does in a country freed from such class conflicts.

For Britain this is of first importance. A great industrial country with a working class second to none, why should we lag behind? We should be playing a major part in this amazing reaching-out towards the other planets in this mighty universe. Why have we fallen so far behind? Because our working class movement has got into the hands of a few parliamentary careerists. Instead of fighting the bourgeoisie they have toadied to them. Instead of recognising the basic contradiction, they have ignored it, and babble about "mixed economy"; instead of recognising the existence of artificial distinctions, they have become a party to them with their Labour lords, baronets and knights. Instead of studying Marx, they have banned Marx and the Marxists. Not until all this is reversed can we make real progress. We want to see the class war made obsolete, but it will only become so with the end of capitalism and the exploitation it represents. End the contradiction at the foundation of present-day society and all the conflicts that arise from it, and then and only then, will Britain take its

place in the vanguard of the mighty new adventure that is opening up before the world of men and women.

Let the Members of Parliament realise the

urgent importance of this; let them carry the class war into the House of Commons, for only by so doing will they be able to bring that ancient institution back to life.