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Jesse Norman

**ROGER  
SCRUTON**

**FOOLS**

**FRAUDS**

**AND**

**FIREBRANDS**

THINKERS OF  
THE NEW LEFT

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# **Fools, Frauds and Firebrands**

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# **Fools, Frauds and Firebrands**

Thinkers of the New Left

**Roger Scruton**

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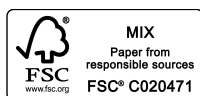
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# INTRODUCTION

In a previous book published in 1985 as *Thinkers of the New Left*, I brought together a series of articles from *The Salisbury Review*. I have reworked the original articles, cutting out writers like R. D. Laing and Rudolf Bahro who have nothing to say to us today, and including substantial new material devoted to developments that are increasingly influential – for example the stunning ‘nonsense machine’ invented by Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, the scorched-earth attack on our ‘colonial’ inheritance by Edward Said, and the recent revival of ‘the communist hypothesis’ by Badiou and Žižek.

My previous book was published at the height of Margaret Thatcher’s reign of terror, at a time when I was still teaching in a university, and known among British left-wing intellectuals as a prominent opponent of their cause, which was the cause of decent people everywhere. The book was therefore greeted with derision and outrage, reviewers falling over each other for the chance to spit on the corpse. Its publication was the beginning of the end for my university career, the reviewers raising serious doubts about my intellectual competence as well as my moral character. This sudden loss of status led to attacks on all my writings, whether or not they touched on politics.

One academic philosopher wrote to Longman, the original publisher, saying, ‘I may tell you with dismay that many colleagues here [i.e. in Oxford] feel that the Longman imprint – a respected one – has been tarnished by association with Scruton’s work.’ He went on in a menacing manner, expressing the hope that ‘the negative reactions generated by this particular publishing venture may make Longman think more carefully about its policy in the future.’ One of Longman’s best-selling educational writers threatened to take his products elsewhere if the book stayed in print and, sure enough, the remaining copies of *Thinkers of the New Left* were soon withdrawn from the bookshops and transferred to my garden shed.

I have naturally been reluctant to return to the scene of such a disaster. Gradually, however, in the wake of 1989, a measure of hesitation

has entered the left-wing vision. It is now common to accept that not everything said, thought or done in the name of socialism has been intellectually respectable or morally right. I was perhaps more than normally alert to this possibility on account of my involvement, at the time of writing, with the underground networks in communist Europe. That involvement had brought me face to face with destruction, and it was obvious to most people who troubled to expose themselves to this destruction that leftist ways of thinking were the ultimate cause of it. *Thinkers of the New Left* appeared in samizdat editions in Polish and Czech, and was subsequently translated into Chinese, Korean and Portuguese. Gradually, and especially after 1989, it became easier for me to express my vision, and I have allowed my publisher, Robin Baird-Smith, to persuade me that a new book might bring relief to students compelled to chew on the glutinous prose of Deleuze, to treat seriously the mad incantations of Žižek, or to believe that there is more to Habermas's theory of communicative action than his inability to communicate it.

The reader will understand from the above paragraphs that this is not a word-mincing book. I would describe it rather as a provocation. However, I make every effort to explain what is good in the authors I review as well as what is bad. My hope is that the result can be read with profit by people of all political persuasions.

In preparing this book for the press I have been greatly helped by comments and criticisms from Mark Dooley, Sebastian Gardner, Robert Grant and Wilfrid Hodges, all of whom are innocent of the crimes committed in the following pages.

**Scrutopia, January 2015**

# 1 WHAT IS LEFT?

The modern use of the term 'left' derives from the French Estates General of 1789, when the nobility sat on the king's right, and the 'third estate' on his left. It might have been the other way round. Indeed, it *was* the other way round for everyone but the king. However, the terms 'left' and 'right' remain with us, and are now applied to factions and opinions within every political order. The resulting picture, of political opinions spread in a single dimension, can be fully understood only locally, and only in conditions of contested and adversarial government. Moreover, even where it captures the outlines of a political process, the picture can hardly do justice to the theories influencing that process, which form the climate of political opinion. Why, therefore, use the word 'left' to describe the writers considered in this book? Why use a single term to cover anarchists like Foucault, Marxist dogmatists like Althusser, exuberant nihilists like Žižek and American-style liberals like Dworkin and Rorty?

The reason is twofold: first the thinkers I discuss have identified themselves by that very term. Second, they illustrate an enduring outlook on the world, and one that has been a permanent feature of Western civilization at least since the Enlightenment, nourished by the elaborate social and political theories that I shall have occasion to discuss in what follows. Many of my subjects have been associated with the New Left, which rose to prominence during the 1960s and 70s. Others form part of the broad ground of post-war political thinking, according to which the state is or ought to be in charge of society and empowered to distribute its goods.

*Thinkers of the New Left* was published before the collapse of the Soviet Union, before the emergence of the European Union as an imperial power and before the transformation of China into an aggressive exponent of gangland capitalism. Thinkers on the left have naturally had to accommodate those developments. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the weakness of socialist economies elsewhere

gave a brief credibility to the economic policies of the 'new right', and even the British Labour Party climbed on to the bandwagon, dropping Clause IV (the commitment to state ownership) from its constitution and accepting that industry is no longer the direct responsibility of government.

For a while it even looked as though there might be an apology forthcoming, from those who had devoted their intellectual and political efforts to whitewashing the Soviet Union or praising the 'people's republics' of China and Vietnam. But the moment of doubt was short-lived. Within a decade the left establishment was back in the driving seat, with Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn renewing their intemperate denunciations of America, the European left regrouped against 'neo-liberalism', as though this had been the trouble all along, Dworkin and Habermas collecting prestigious prizes for their barely readable but impeccably orthodox books, and the veteran communist Eric Hobsbawm rewarded for a lifetime of unswerving loyalty to the Soviet Union by his appointment as 'Companion of Honour' to the Queen.

True, the enemy was no longer described as before: the Marxist template did not easily fit the new conditions, and it seemed a trifle foolish to champion the cause of the working class, when its last members were joining the ranks of the unemployable or the self-employed. But then came the financial crisis, with people all around the world thrown into comparative poverty while the seeming culprits – the bankers, the financiers, and the speculators – escaped with their bonuses intact. As a result, books critical of market economics began to enjoy a new popularity, whether reminding us that real goods are not exchangeable (Michael Sandel: *What Money Can't Buy*) or arguing that markets, in current conditions, cause a massive transfer of wealth from the poorest to the richest (Joseph Stiglitz: *The Price of Inequality*, and Thomas Piketty: *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*). And from the ever-fertile source of Marxist humanism thinkers extracted new arguments to describe the moral and spiritual degradation of humanity in the condition of free exchange (Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *L'esthétisation du monde: vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste*; Naomi Klein, *No Logo*; Philip Roscoe, *I Spend, Therefore I Am*).

Thinkers and writers on the left therefore soon returned to equilibrium, assured the world that they had never really been taken in by communist propaganda, and renewed their attacks on Western civilization and its 'neo-liberal' economics as the principal threat to humanity in a globalized

world. 'Right-wing' has remained as much a term of abuse today as it was before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the attitudes described in this book have adapted themselves to the new conditions with very little moderation of their oppositional zeal. This curious fact is one of many puzzles that I consider in what follows.

The left-wing position was already clearly defined at the time when the distinction between left and right was invented. Leftists believe, with the Jacobins of the French Revolution, that the goods of this world are unjustly distributed, and that the fault lies not in human nature but in usurpations practised by a dominant class. They define themselves in opposition to established power, the champions of a new order that will rectify the ancient grievance of the oppressed.

Two attributes of the new order justify the pursuit of it: liberation and 'social justice'. These correspond roughly to the liberty and equality advocated at the French Revolution, but only roughly. The liberation advocated by left-wing movements today does not mean simply freedom from political oppression or the right to go about one's business undisturbed. It means emancipation from the 'structures': from the institutions, customs and conventions that shaped the 'bourgeois' order, and which established a shared system of norms and values at the heart of Western society. Even those left-wingers who eschew the libertarianism of the 1960s regard liberty as a form of *release* from social constraints. Much of their literature is devoted to deconstructing such institutions as the family, the school, the law and the nation state through which the inheritance of Western civilization has been passed down to us. This literature, seen at its most fertile in the writings of Foucault, represents as 'structures of domination' what others see merely as the instruments of civil order.

Liberation of the victim is a restless cause, since new victims always appear over the horizon as the last ones escape into the void. The liberation of women from male oppression, of animals from human abuse, of homosexuals and transsexuals from 'homophobia', even of Muslims from 'Islamophobia' – all these have been absorbed into the more recent leftist agendas, to be enshrined in laws and committees overseen by a censorious officialdom. Gradually the old norms of social order have been marginalized, or even penalized as violations of 'human rights'. Indeed, the cause of 'liberation' has seen the proliferation of more laws than were ever invented to suppress it – just think of what is now ordained in the cause of 'non-discrimination'.

Likewise the goal of 'social justice' is no longer equality before the law, or the equal claim to the rights of citizenship, as these were advocated at the Enlightenment. The goal is a comprehensive rearrangement of society, so that privileges, hierarchies, and even the unequal distribution of goods are either overcome or challenged. The more radical egalitarianism of the nineteenth-century Marxists and anarchists, who sought for the abolition of private property, perhaps no longer has widespread appeal. But behind the goal of 'social justice' there marches another and more dogged egalitarian mentality, which believes that inequality in whatever sphere – property, leisure, legal privilege, social rank, educational opportunities, or whatever else we might wish for ourselves and our children – is unjust until proven otherwise. In every sphere in which the social position of individuals might be compared, equality is the default position.

Built into the mild-mannered prose of John Rawls that assumption might pass unnoticed. In Dworkin's more agitated calls for 'respect as an equal', as opposed to 'equal respect', it might cause people to wonder where the argument is going. But the most important point to notice is that it is an argument that allows *nothing to stand in its way*. No existing custom, institution, law or hierarchy; no tradition, distinction, rule or piety can trump equality, if it cannot provide itself with independent credentials. Everything that does not conform to the egalitarian goal must be pulled down and built again, and the mere fact that some custom or institution has been handed down and accepted is no argument in its favour. In this way 'social justice' becomes a barely concealed demand for the 'clean sweep' of history that revolutionaries have always attempted.

The two goals of liberation and social justice are not obviously compatible, any more than were the liberty and equality advocated at the French Revolution. If liberation involves the liberation of individual potential, how do we stop the ambitious, the energetic, the intelligent, the good-looking and the strong from getting ahead, and what should we allow ourselves by way of constraining them? Best not to confront that impossible question. Best to summon the old resentments rather than to examine what would follow from expressing them. By declaring war on traditional hierarchies and institutions in the name of its two ideals, therefore, the left is able to obscure the conflict between them. Moreover, 'social justice' is a goal so overwhelmingly important, so unquestionably superior to the established interests that stand against it, as to purify every action done in its name.

It is important to take note of this purifying potential. Many people on the left are sceptical towards utopian impulses; at the same time, having allied themselves beneath a moralizing banner, they inevitably find themselves galvanized, inspired and eventually governed by the most fervent members of their sect. For politics on the left is politics with a *goal*: your place within the alliance is judged by the lengths you are prepared to go to on behalf of 'social justice', however defined. Conservatism – at least, conservatism in the British tradition – is a politics of custom, compromise and settled indecision. For the conservative, political association should be seen in the same way as friendship: it has no overriding purpose, but changes from day to day, in accordance with the unforeseeable logic of a conversation. Extremists within the conservative alliance, therefore, are isolated, eccentric and even dangerous. Far from being more deeply committed partners in a common enterprise, they are separated by their very purposefulness from those whom they seek to lead.<sup>1</sup>

Marx dismissed the various socialisms current in his day as 'utopian', contrasting 'utopian socialism' with his own 'scientific socialism' that promised 'full communism' as its predictable outcome. The 'historical inevitability' of this condition relieved Marx of the necessity to describe it. The 'science' consists in the 'laws of historical motion' set out in *Das Kapital* and elsewhere, according to which economic development brings about successive changes in the economic infrastructure of society, enabling us to predict that private property will one day disappear. After a period of socialist guardianship – a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – the state will 'wither away', there will be neither law nor the need for it, and everything will be owned in common. There will be no division of labour and each person will live out the full range of his needs and desires, 'hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, tending cattle in the evening and engaging in literary criticism after dinner', as we are told in *The German Ideology*.

To say that this is 'scientific' rather than utopian is, in retrospect, little more than a joke. Marx's remark about hunting, fishing, hobby farming and lit. crit. is the only attempt he makes to describe what life will be like without private property – and if you ask who gives you the gun or the fishing rod, who organizes the pack of hounds, who maintains the coverts and the waterways, who disposes of the milk and the calves and

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<sup>1</sup> The argument here is spelled out at length in my book, *How to be a Conservative*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014. See also Chapter 10 below.

who publishes the lit. crit., such questions will be dismissed as ‘beside the point’, and as matters to be settled by a future that is none of your business. And as to whether the immense amount of organization required for these leisure activities of the universal upper class will be possible, in a condition in which there is no law, no property, and therefore no chain of command, such questions are too trivial to be noticed. Or rather, they are too serious to be considered, and therefore go unnoticed. For it requires but the slightest critical address, to recognize that Marx’s ‘full communism’ embodies a contradiction: it is a state in which all the benefits of legal order are still present, even though there is no law; in which all the products of social cooperation are still in existence, even though nobody enjoys the property rights which hitherto have provided the sole motive for producing them.

The contradictory nature of the socialist utopias is one explanation of the violence involved in the attempt to impose them: it takes infinite force to make people do what is impossible. And the memory of the utopias has weighed heavily on both the New Left thinkers of the 1960s, and on the American left liberals who adopted their agenda. It is no longer possible to take refuge in the airy speculations that contented Marx. Real thinking is needed if we are to believe that history either tends or ought to tend in a socialist direction. Hence the emergence of socialist historians, who systematically downplay the atrocities committed in the name of socialism, and blame the disasters on the ‘reactionary’ forces that impeded socialism’s advance. Rather than attempting to define the goals of liberation and equality, thinkers of the New Left instead created a mythopoeic narrative of the modern world, in which the wars and genocides were attributed to those who have resisted the righteous ‘struggle’ for social justice. History was rewritten as a conflict between good and evil, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And, however nuanced and embellished by its many brilliant exponents, this Manichean vision remains with us, enshrined in the school curriculum and in the media.

The moral asymmetry, which attributes to the left a monopoly of moral virtue, and uses ‘right’ always as a term of abuse, accompanies a logical asymmetry, namely, an assumption that the onus of proof lies always on the other side. Nor can this onus be discharged. Thus in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the theories of Marx were being recycled as the true account of the sufferings of humanity under ‘capitalist’ regimes, it was rare to find any mention in the left-wing journals of the criticisms that

Marx's writings had encountered during the previous century. Marx's theory of history had been put in question by Maitland, Weber and Sombart;<sup>2</sup> his labour theory of value by Böhm-Bawerk, Mises, and many more;<sup>3</sup> his theories of false consciousness, alienation and class struggle by a whole range of thinkers, from Mallock and Sombart to Popper, Hayek and Aron.<sup>4</sup> Not all those critics could be placed on the right of the political spectrum, nor had they all been hostile to the idea of 'social justice'. Yet none of them, so far as I could discover when I came to write this book, had been answered by the New Left with anything more than a sneer.

That said, we must recognize that the Marxist spectacles are no longer on the left-wing nose. Why they were removed, and by whom, it is hard to say. But for whatever cause, left-wing politics has discarded the revolutionary paradigm advanced by the New Left, in favour of bureaucratic routines and the institutionalization of the welfare culture. The two goals of liberation and social justice remain in place: but they are promoted by legislation, committees and government commissions empowered to root out the sources of discrimination. Liberation and social justice have been bureaucratized. In looking back at the left intellectuals in the decades before the collapse of the Soviet Union, therefore, I am observing a culture that now survives largely in its academic redoubts, feeding from the jargon-ridden prose that it amassed in university libraries, in the days when universities were part of the anti-capitalist 'struggle'.

But note that word. It belongs to an enclosed vocabulary, one that entered the language with Marxism and which was gradually simplified and regimented in the years when socialists were occupying the intellectual high ground. From its earliest days the communist movement had fought over language, and esteemed the theories of Marx partly because they provided convenient labels with which to brand both friend

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<sup>2</sup> F. W. Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England*, London, 1908; W. Sombart, *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*, Berlin, 1902, 1916, 1927, and *Socialism and the Social Movement*, tr. M. Epstein, London, 1909; Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, tr. E. Fischoff et al., ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, vol. 1, New York, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, *Karl Marx and the Close of his System*, Clifton, NJ, 1949; Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism*, 2nd edn, New Haven, 1953.

<sup>4</sup> W. H. Mallock, *A Critical examination of Socialism*, London, 1909; W. Sombart, op. cit.; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 5th edn, London, 1966; F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, London, 1945; Raymond Aron, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, vol. 1, tr. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver, London, 1968.

and enemy and to dramatize the conflict between them. And this habit proved contagious, so that all subsequent leftist movements were to some extent tainted by it. Indeed, the transformation of the language of politics has been the principal legacy of the Left, and it is one aim of this book to rescue that language from socialist Newspeak.

We owe the term 'Newspeak' to George Orwell's chilling portrait of a fictitious totalitarian state. But the capture of language by the left is far older, beginning with the French Revolution and its slogans. When it took the turn that fascinated Orwell it was with the Socialist International and the eager engagement of the Russian intelligentsia. Those who emerged triumphant from the Second International in 1889 had been granted a vision of a transformed world. This Gnostic revelation was so clear that no argument was necessary, and no argument possible, that would provide it with a justifying proof. All that mattered was to distinguish those who shared the vision from those who dissented. And the most dangerous were those who dissented by so small a margin that they threatened to mingle their energies with yours, and so to pollute the pure stream of action.

From the beginning, therefore, labels were required that would stigmatize the enemies within and justify their expulsion: they were revisionists, deviationists, infantile leftists, utopian socialists, social fascists, and so on. The division between Menshevik and Bolshevik following the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1904 epitomized this process: those peculiar fabricated words, which were themselves crystallized lies, since the Mensheviks (minority) in fact composed the majority, were thereafter graven in the language of politics and in the motives of the communist elite.

The success of those labels in marginalizing and condemning the opponent fortified the communist conviction that you could change reality by changing words. You could create a proletarian culture, just by inventing the word 'proletcult'. You could bring about the downfall of the free economy, simply by shouting 'crisis of capitalism' every time the subject arose. You could combine the absolute power of the Communist Party with the free consent of the people, by announcing communist rule as 'democratic centralism' and describing the countries where it was imposed as 'people's democracies.' Newspeak reassembles the political landscape, dividing it in unfamiliar ways, and creating the impression that, like the anatomist's description of the human body, it reveals the hidden frame on which the superficial unities are hung. In that way it makes it easy to dismiss as illusions the realities by which we live.

Newspeak occurs whenever the primary purpose of language – which is to describe reality – is replaced by the rival purpose of asserting power over it. The fundamental speech-act is only superficially represented by the assertoric grammar. Newspeak sentences sound like assertions, but their underlying logic is that of the spell. They conjure the triumph of words over things, the futility of rational argument, and also the danger of resistance. As a result Newspeak developed its own special syntax, which – while closely related to the syntax deployed in ordinary descriptions – carefully avoids any encounter with reality or any exposure to the logic of rational argument. Françoise Thom has argued this in her brilliant study *La langue de bois*.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of communist Newspeak, in Thom's ironical words, has been 'to protect ideology from the malicious attacks of real things'.

Human individuals are the most important of those real things, the obstacles that all revolutionary systems must overcome, and which all ideologies must destroy. Their attachment to particulars and contingencies; their embarrassing tendency to reject what has been devised for their betterment; their freedom of choice and the rights and duties through which they exercise it – all these are obstacles to the conscientious revolutionaries, as they strive to implement their five-year plan. Hence the need to phrase political choice in such a way that individuals have no part in it. Newspeak prefers to speak of forces, classes and the march of history, and regards the actions of Great Men as acceptable subjects for discussion only because Great Men, like Napoleon, Lenin and Hitler, are really the expression of abstract forces, such as imperialism, revolutionary socialism and fascism.<sup>6</sup> The 'isms' that govern political change work *through* people, but not *from* them.

Connected with the relentless use of abstractions is the feature that Thom describes as 'pan-dynamism'. The world of Newspeak is a world of abstract forces, in which individuals are merely local embodiments of the 'isms' that are revealed in them. Hence it is a world without action. But it is not a world without movement. On the contrary, everything is in constant motion, swept onwards by the forces of progress, or impeded by the forces of reaction. There is no equilibrium, no stasis and no rest in the

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<sup>5</sup> Françoise Thom, *La langue de bois*, Paris, 1984, tr. C. Janson, *Newspeak*, London, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> See the famous letter from Engels to Borgius, translated Sidney Hook, *New Internationalist* 1 (3) (September–October 1934), pp. 81–5.

world of Newspeak. All stillness is a deception, the quietus of a volcano that could erupt at any time. Peace never appears in Newspeak as a condition of rest and normality. It is always something to 'fight for', and 'Fight for Peace!', 'Struggle for Peace!' took their place among the official slogans of the Communist Party.

From the same source comes the penchant for 'irreversible' changes. Since everything is in motion and the 'struggle' between the forces of progress and the forces of reaction is always and everywhere, it is important that the triumph of ideology over reality be constantly recorded and endorsed. Hence progressive forces always achieve 'irreversible changes', while reactionary forces are wrong-footed by their contradictory and merely 'nostalgic' attempts to defend a doomed social order.

Many words with respectable origins end up as Newspeak, used to denounce, exhort and condemn without regard for observable realities. Of no word has this been more true than the term 'capitalism', when used to condemn free economies as forms of slavery and exploitation. We can disagree with the central argument put forward by Marx in *Das Kapital*, while accepting that there is such a thing as economic capital. And we might describe an economy in which substantial capital is in the hands of private individuals as capitalist, meaning that term as a neutral description that may or may not, in due course, form part of an explanatory theory. But that is not how the term is used in such phrases as 'the crisis of capitalism', 'capitalist exploitation', 'capitalist ideology', and so on, where it functions again as a spell, the equivalent in economic theory of Khrushchev's great scream from the rostrum of the United Nations: 'We will bury you!' By describing free economies with this term, we cast the spell that extinguishes them. The reality of the free economy disappears behind the description, to be replaced by a strange baroque edifice, constantly falling to the ground in a dream-sequence of ruin.

The concepts that arise in normal dialogue arise from the need to compromise, to reach agreements, to establish peaceful coordination with people who do not share our projects or our affections, but who are as much in need of space as we are. Such concepts have little or nothing to do with the schemes and plans of the revolutionary left, since they permit those who use them to change course, to drop one goal and pick up another, to amend their ways and to show the kind of flexibility on which lasting peace always, in the end, depends.

Hence, although I, the intellectual in my garret, can contemplate with satisfaction and a clear conscience the 'liquidation of the bourgeoisie', when I enter the shop downstairs I must speak another language. Only in the most distant sense is this woman behind the counter a member of the bourgeoisie. If I choose nevertheless so to see her it is because I am conjuring with the word 'bourgeois' – I am trying to gain power over this person through labelling her. In confronting the shopkeeper as a human being I must renounce this presumptuous bid for power, and accord to her a voice of her own. My language must make room for her voice, and that means it must be shaped to permit the resolution of conflict, the forging of agreement, including the agreement to differ. I make remarks about the weather, grumble about politics, 'pass the time of day' – and my language has the effect of softening reality, of making it pliable and serviceable. Newspeak, which denies reality, also hardens it, by turning it into something alien and resistant, a thing to be 'struggled with' and triumphed over.

I may have come down from my garret with a plan in view, intending the first move towards the liquidation of the bourgeoisie about which I had read in my Marxist textbook. But this plan will not survive the first exchange of words with my chosen victim, and the attempt to impose it or to speak the language that announces it will have the same effect as the wind in Aesop's fable, competing with the sun to remove the coat of a traveller. Ordinary language warms and softens; Newspeak freezes and hardens. And ordinary discourse generates out of its own resources the concepts that Newspeak forbids: fair/unfair; just/unjust; right/duty; honest/dishonest; legal/illegal; yours/mine. Such distinctions, which belong to the free exchange of feelings, opinions and goods, also, when freely expressed and acted upon, create a society in which order is spontaneous and not planned, and in which the unequal distribution of assets arises 'by an invisible hand'.

Newspeak does not merely impose a plan; it also eliminates the discourse through which human beings can live without one. If justice is referred to in Newspeak, it is not the justice of individual dealings, but 'social justice', the kind of 'justice' imposed by a plan, which invariably involves depriving individuals of things that they have acquired by fair dealing in the market. In the opinion of almost all the thinkers whom I discuss in what follows, government is the art of seizing and then redistributing the things to which all citizens are supposedly entitled. It is not the expression of a pre-existing social order shaped by our

free agreements and our natural disposition to hold ourselves and our neighbours to account. It is the creator and manager of a social order framed according to an idea of 'social justice' and imposed on the people by a series of top-down decrees.

Intellectuals are naturally attracted by the idea of a planned society, in the belief that they will be in charge of it. As a result they tend to lose sight of the fact that real social discourse is part of day-to-day problem solving and the minute search for agreement. Real social discourse veers away from 'irreversible changes,' regards all arrangements as adjustable, and allows a voice to those whose agreement it needs. From just the same source stems the English common law and the parliamentary institutions that have embodied the sovereignty of the British people.

Repeatedly in what follows we will encounter the Newspeak of left-leaning thinkers. Where conservatives and old-fashioned liberals speak of authority, government and institutions, those on the left refer to power and domination. Laws and offices play only a marginal part in the left-wing vision of political life, while classes, powers and the forms of control are invoked as the root phenomena of the civil order, together with the 'ideology' that mystifies those things and rescues them from judgement. Newspeak represents the political process as a constant 'struggle' concealed by fictions of legitimacy and allegiance. Peel away the ideology, and the 'truth' of politics is revealed. The truth is power, and the hope of deposing it.

Hence almost nothing of political life as we know it finds a place in the thinking of those whom I describe in these pages. Institutions like Parliament and the common law courts; spiritual callings associated with churches, chapels, synagogues and mosques; schools and professional bodies; private charities, clubs, and societies; Scouts, Guides and village tournaments; football teams, brass bands and orchestras; choirs, theatre-groups and philately groups – in short all the ways in which people associate, and create from their consensual intermingling the patterns of authority and obedience through which they live, all the 'little platoons' of Burke and Tocqueville – are missing from the leftist worldview or, if present (as they are present in Gramsci and E. P. Thompson, for example), both sentimentalized and politicized, so as to become part of the 'struggle' of the working class.

We should not be surprised that, when the communists seized power in Eastern Europe, their first task was to decapitate the little platoons – so that Kádár, when Minister of the Interior in the 1948 government in

Hungary, managed to destroy five thousand in a single year. Newspeak, which sees the world in terms of power and struggle, encourages the view that all associations not controlled by the righteous leaders are a danger to the state. And by acting on this view you make it true. When the seminar, the troop or the choir can meet only with the permission of the Party, the Party automatically becomes their enemy.

In this way, it seems to me, it is not an accident that the triumph of leftist ways of thinking has so often led to totalitarian government. The pursuit of abstract social justice goes hand in hand with the view that power struggles and relations of domination express the truth of our social condition, and that the consensual customs, inherited institutions and systems of law that have brought peace to real communities are merely the disguises worn by power. The goal is to seize that power, and to use it to liberate the oppressed, distributing all the assets of society according to the just requirements of the plan.

Intellectuals who think that way are already ruling out the possibility of compromise. Their totalitarian language does not set out a path of negotiation but instead divides human beings into innocent and guilty groups. Behind the impassioned rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto*, behind the pseudo-science of Marx's labour theory of value, and behind the class analysis of human history, lies a single emotional source – resentment of those who control things. This resentment is both rationalized and amplified by the proof that property owners form a 'class'. According to the theory, the 'bourgeois' class has a shared moral identity, a shared and systematic access to the levers of power, and a shared body of privileges. Moreover all those good things are acquired and retained through the 'exploitation' of the proletariat, which has nothing to part with except its labour, and which will therefore always be cheated of its just deserts.

That theory has been effective not merely because it serves the function of amplifying and legitimizing resentment, but also because it is able to expose its rivals as 'mere ideology'. Here, I believe, is the most cunning feature of Marxism: that it has been able to pass itself off as a science. Having hit on the distinction between ideology and science, Marx set out to prove that his own ideology was *in itself* a science. Moreover, Marx's alleged science undermined the beliefs of his opponents. The theories of the rule of law, the separation of powers, the right of property, and so on, as these had been expounded by 'bourgeois' thinkers like Montesquieu and Hegel, were shown, by the Marxian class analysis, to be not truth-

seeking but power-seeking devices: ways of hanging on to the privileges conferred by the bourgeois order. By exposing this ideology as a self-serving pretence the class-theory vindicated its own claims to scientific objectivity.

There is a kind of theological cunning in this aspect of Marxist thought, a cunning that we find also in Foucault's conception of the *episteme*, which is an updated version of Marx's theory of ideology. Since the class-theory is a genuine science, bourgeois political thought is ideology. And since the class-theory exposes bourgeois thought as ideology, it must be science. We have entered the magic circle of a creation myth. Moreover, by dressing up the theory in scientific language Marx has endowed it with the character of a badge of initiation. Not everybody can speak this language. A scientific theory defines the elite that can understand and apply it. It offers proof of the elite's enlightened knowledge and therefore of its title to govern. It is this feature that justifies the charge made by Eric Voegelin, Alain Besançon and others, that Marxism is a kind of Gnosticism, a title to 'government through knowledge'.<sup>7</sup>

Looked at with the superman superciliousness of Nietzsche, resentment may seem like the bitter dregs of the 'slave morality', the impoverished loss of spirit that comes about when people take more pleasure in bringing others down than in raising themselves up. But that is the wrong way to look at it. Resentment is not a good thing to feel, either for its subject or its object. But the business of society is to conduct our social life so that resentment does not occur: to live by mutual aid and fellowship, not so as to be all alike and inoffensively mediocre, but so as to gain others' cooperation in our small successes. Living in this way we create the channels through which resentment drains away of its own accord: channels like custom, gift, hospitality, shared worship, penitence, forgiveness and the common law, all of which are instantly stopped up when the totalitarians come to power. Resentment is to the body politic what pain is to the body: it is bad to feel it, but good to be capable of feeling it, since without the ability to feel it we will not survive. Hence we should not resent the fact that we resent, but accept it, as a part of the human condition, something to be managed along with all our other joys and afflictions. However, resentment can be transformed into a governing emotion and a social cause, and thereby gain release from the constraints that normally contain it. This happens

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<sup>7</sup> See Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, Washington, 1968; Alain Besançon, *The Intellectual Origins of Leninism*, tr. Sarah Matthews, Oxford, 1981.

when resentment loses the specificity of its target, and becomes directed to society as a whole. That, it seems to me, is what happens when left-wing movements take over. In such cases resentment ceases to be a response to another's unmerited success and becomes instead an existential posture: the posture of the one whom the world has betrayed. Such a person does not seek to negotiate within existing structures, but to gain total power, so as to abolish the structures themselves. He will set himself against all forms of mediation, compromise and debate, and against the legal and moral norms that give a voice to the dissenter and sovereignty to the ordinary person. He will set about destroying the enemy, whom he will conceive in collective terms, as the class, group or race that hitherto controlled the world and which must now in turn be controlled. And all institutions that grant protection to that class or a voice in the political process will be targets for his destructive rage.

That posture is, in my view, the core of a serious social disorder. Our civilization has lived through this disorder, not once or twice but half a dozen times since the Reformation. In considering the thinkers whom I discuss in this book we will, I believe, understand this disorder in a new way – not merely as a misplaced religion or a form of Gnosticism, as other commentators have seen it, but also as a repudiation of what we, the inheritors of Western civilization, have received as our historical bequest. I call to mind the words of Goethe's Mephistopheles, when called upon to explain himself: *Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint* – I am the spirit who always denies, the one who reduces Something to Nothing, and who thereby undoes the work of creation.

This essential negativity can be perceived in many of the writers whom I discuss. Theirs is an oppositional voice, a cry against the actual on behalf of the unknowable. The generation of the 1960s was not disposed to ask the fundamental question how social justice and liberation could be reconciled. It wished only for the theories, however opaque and unintelligible, that would authorize its opposition to the existing order.<sup>8</sup> It had identified the rewards of intellectual life through an imagined unity between the intellectuals and the working class, and had sought for a language that would expose and delegitimize the 'powers' that maintained the 'bourgeois' order in being. Newspeak was essential to its programme, reducing what others saw as authority,

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<sup>8</sup> See Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989.

legality and legitimacy to power, struggle and domination. And when, in the works of Lacan, Deleuze and Althusser, the nonsense machine began to crank out its impenetrable sentences, of which nothing could be understood except that they all had 'capitalism' as their target, it looked as though Nothing had at last found its voice. Henceforth the bourgeois order would be vaporized and mankind would march victorious into the Void.

## 2 RESENTMENT IN BRITAIN: HOBBSBAWM AND THOMPSON

It is a remarkable feature of the English reading public that it is always ready to treat historians as leaders in the world of ideas. As the newly formed Labour Party took shape as a political force in the early twentieth century, the popular histories of H. G. Wells, the Webbs and their fellow Fabians made socialism synonymous with 'progress.' The rewriting of history with the socialist message buried deep within it thereafter became a kind of orthodoxy on the left, with R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* of 1926 becoming a seminal text for a whole generation of British intellectuals. For Tawney the Labour movement stood side by side with the Protestant churches against the 'acquisitive society' that he had criticized in an earlier book of that title. It was a famous historian, Arnold Toynbee, who gave his name to Toynbee Hall, home of the Workers Educational Association (WEA), where Tawney resided along with his friend William Beveridge, who was to be one of the architects of the Welfare State. Labour history and the WEA were thereafter inextricably mixed, and it became almost a dogma on the British intellectual left that you joined forces with the workers by teaching them history.

Among the historians whose work laid the foundations for the New Left in Britain two in particular stand out, both for the brilliance of their writing and for the far-reaching impact of their commitments. Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson were nurtured by the communist movement that swept so many into its embrace before and during the Second World War. And both were active in supporting the peace movement in the years when this was the key aim of Soviet foreign policy. But while Hobsbawm was an establishment figure and a respected member of the academy, Thompson was never comfortable in an academic environment, and left the University of Warwick in protest at its commercialization in 1971. He prided himself as a freelance intellectual in the mould of Karl Marx. His writings appeared in reviews

and pamphlets, and his magnum opus – *The Making of the English Working Class* – lay well outside the framework of academic social history as that was conceived in 1963, when the work was published.

Hobsbawm has been much criticized, less for his communist sympathies than for his dogged loyalty to the Party throughout the exposure of its crimes, abandoning his membership only when he had no choice, the Communist Party of Great Britain having finally dissolved itself in embarrassment in 1990. Thompson, by contrast, had left the Party in 1956, in response to the Soviet invasion of Hungary, which the Communist Party of Great Britain refused to condemn, Hobsbawm affirming (in the *Daily Worker*, 9 November 1956) that he approved of what was happening in Hungary, though ‘with a heavy heart’. Until his death in 2012 Hobsbawm continued to extend his heavy-hearted approval to atrocities that other former communists reviewed with growing outrage, and this has cast a certain shadow over his reputation. But his case also illustrates just how far you can go in collaborating with crime, when the crime is committed on the left. Crimes committed on the right receive no such absolution; and this tells us something important about left-wing movements, which seem to have the capacity assumed by religions, both to authorize crime and to wash the conscience of those who connive at it.

It is indeed in religious terms that we should understand the fascination that communism exerted over young intellectuals between the wars. The Cambridge spies – Philby, Burgess, Maclean and Blunt – betrayed many people to their deaths and, by revealing the identities of those East European patriots who were organizing resistance to the Nazis in the hope of a democratic, rather than a communist, future, they ensured that Stalin would be able to ‘liquidate’ the most important opponents of his planned advance into Eastern Europe.

This caused no apparent remorse to the spies, who were animated by a compulsive repudiation of their country and its institutions. They belonged to an elite whose members had lost confidence in their right to inherited privilege, and who had made a religion from negating the values instilled by the society into which they were born. They were hungry for the philosophy that would vindicate their destructive fixation, and the Communist Party provided it, offering not only doctrine and commitment, but membership, authority and obedience – the very things that, in their inherited form, the spies were determined to reject.

Clandestine organizations create a band of visiting angels, who will move among ordinary people crowned by a halo that is observable only

to themselves. But this Freemasonry of the elect was not the only source of the Communist Party's appeal. Its doctrine promised both a radiant future and a path of heroic 'struggle' on the way to it. European society had all but destroyed itself in the First World War, from which ordinary people emerged with only losses and no compensating gains. To young intellectuals disillusioned with the ensuing reality, Utopia had become a precious asset. It was the one thing to be trusted, precisely because it contained nothing real. It demanded sacrifice and commitment; it filled life with meaning, by providing a formula that rewrote every negative as a positive, every destructive act as an act of creation. Utopia issued instructions, implacable, secret but authoritative instructions that ordered you to betray everything and everybody that stood in its way – which meant everything and everybody. The thrill of all this was irresistible to people who were taking revenge on a world that they had refused to inherit.

It was not only in Britain that the Communist Party exerted its malignant influence. In a vivid and disturbing book Czesław Miłosz has described the Satanic power of communism over his generation of Polish intellectuals, closing their minds to all countervailing arguments and extinguishing, one by one, the loyalties by which their fellow citizens lived – loyalties to family, Church, country and the legal order.<sup>1</sup> The writers, artists and musicians of France and Germany also fell under the spell. The Communist Party appealed not because of its concrete policies or any believable programme of action within the existing order. It appealed because it addressed the *inner* disorder of the intellectual class, in a world where there was nothing real to believe in.

The Party's ability to turn the negative to the positive, and repudiation to redemption, offered precisely the psychic therapy of which those who had lost all religious faith and all civic affection stood in need. Their negative condition was well expressed, on behalf of the French intellectuals, by André Breton, in his second Surrealist Manifesto of 1930:

Everything remains to be done, every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste the ideas of family, country, religion . . . [Surrealists] intend to savour fully the profound sorrow, so well acted, with which the bourgeois public . . . greets the steadfast and unyielding need they

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<sup>1</sup> *The Captive Mind*, 1953, tr. Jane Zielonko, Harmondsworth, Penguin Modern Classics, 2001.

display to laugh like savages in the presence of the French flag, to vomit their disgust in the face of every priest, and to level at the breed of 'basic duties' the long-range weapon of sexual cynicism.

Childish though that seems in retrospect, it is also a transparent appeal for help. Breton is calling for a system of belief that would offer a new order and a new form of membership – one that would turn all those negatives around, and rewrite them in the language of self-affirmation.

Hobsbawm had more excuse than most of the Communist Party's new recruits. Born in Alexandria to Jewish parents, orphaned in childhood, and living in Berlin with the relatives who had adopted him, he suffered the trauma of Hitler's rise to power in his most vulnerable years. Escaping in the nick of time with his adoptive family to England he found himself uprooted, traumatized, with a mind wiped clean of all inherited loyalties and yet hungry for something that would give sense to the intellectual life to which he was so perfectly adapted and which would also recruit him in the war against fascism. He attached himself to the communist cause with unswerving devotion, and studied the ways in which he could advance that cause through scholarship.

It is impossible to know, and probably unwise to enquire, how much intellectual communists of Hobsbawm's generation were involved in the subversive activities that we now associate with the circle around Philby, Burgess and Maclean. Suspicions have been raised concerning the historian of the English civil war, Christopher Hill, a Foreign Office official during the crucial last two years of the war, when Stalin was dependent on his London spies to facilitate the takeover of Eastern Europe. Hill, subsequently Master of Balliol, was a member of the Communist Party Historians Group in Oxford after the war, alongside Hobsbawm, Thompson and Raphael Samuel. In 1952 he and Samuel founded the influential journal *Past and Present*, devoted to the Marxist reading of history. Associated with this work was the radical sociologist Ralph Miliband, who came as a refugee from Belgium in 1940, and whose Polish father had fought in the Soviet army against his own country in the Polish–Soviet war of 1920 – the war in which Lenin tried, but failed, to establish the bridge that would unite the communist movements in Russia and Germany.

Miliband was an active contributor to the *New Reasoner*, established by E. P. Thompson and others in 1958. This joined with the *Universities and Left Review* to become the *New Left Review* in 1960 (see Chapter 7

below). His sympathies were with the international socialist movement, but he was never, to my knowledge, a member of the Communist Party, even if inclined to the revolutionary, rather than the parliamentary 'road to socialism.' His disappointment with the Labour Party, which he joined in 1951, finds vitriolic expression in his book *Capitalist Democracy in Britain*, published in 1982. In that work Miliband argues that the Labour Party, through endorsing the institutions of British politics, had effectively silenced the voice of the working class, and so helped to contain the 'pressure from below' that had elsewhere erupted in revolution. At the same time he grudgingly acknowledged that the ability of British institutions to contain protests from below explains the unparalleled peace that the British people have enjoyed since the end of the seventeenth century. Substitute the words 'respond to' for the word 'contain' and that sentence would be the first step in a right-wing riposte to Miliband's skewed reading of our national history.

Whatever the extent of their involvement in communist politics, those writers are distinguished from the Cambridge spies and the fellow travellers by one fact above all, which is their intellectual seriousness. They saw communism as an attempt to put the philosophy of Karl Marx into practice, and accepted Marxism as the first and only attempt to elevate the study of history to the status of a science. Their interest for us today is inseparable from their desire to rewrite history in Marxist terms, and in doing so to use historical understanding as an instrument of social policy.

No reader of Hobsbawm's historical works can fail to be engaged by them. Their breadth of knowledge is matched by the elegance of their prose, and it is a testimony to Hobsbawm's talents, as a scholar and a man of letters, that he was elected to Fellowship by both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature. His four-volume history of the emergence of the modern world – *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848*, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*, and *The Age of Extremes, 1914–1991* – is a remarkable work of synthesis, seriously misleading only in the fourth volume, where the attempt to whitewash the communist experiment and to lay the blame for all ills at the door of 'capitalism' has an aspect that is partly sinister, partly quaint. Hobsbawm's account of the Industrial Revolution and its imperial outreach – *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* – has won a well-deserved place as a school textbook on the subject, reprinted almost every year since its first publication in 1968. Reflecting on the method adopted in those

books Hobsbawm wrote that ‘no serious discussion of history is possible which doesn’t refer back to Marx or, more exactly, which does not start where he starts. And that means, basically... a materialist conception of history.’<sup>2</sup> And it is from this claim that any evaluation of Hobsbawm’s contribution to the intellectual life should begin.

Marx’s ‘materialist’ theory of history was a response to Hegel, who had seen the evolution of human societies as driven by the consciousness of their members, as this is expressed in religion, morality, law and culture. Not so, Marx famously wrote. It is ‘not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness’ (*The German Ideology*). Life is not a conscious process occurring in the realm of ideas, but a ‘material’ reality, rooted in the needs of the organism. And the basis of social life is likewise material, involving the production, distribution and exchange of goods. Economic activity is the ‘base’ on which the ‘superstructure’ of society rests. Those ‘mental’ or ‘spiritual’ factors that are so often singled out as the agents of historical change – religious movements, legal innovations, the self-understanding and culture of local communities, even the institutions that form the identity of a nation state – are to be understood as by-products of material production. Human societies evolve because productive forces grow, necessitating constant revolutions in property relations, from slavery to feudalism to capitalism and beyond. The social superstructure changes in response to the needs and opportunities of production, in something like the way species adapt to evolutionary pressure. And the consciousness of a society, in religion, culture and law, is the outcome of this process, driven, in the last analysis, by the laws of economic growth.

How to make sense of this is a fascinating question to which only one modern thinker has, to my knowledge, given a plausible answer – and that is G. A. Cohen, in *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*.<sup>3</sup> But the idea can be grasped in outline through a few examples. Consider the changes in English land law during the course of the nineteenth century. These empowered life-tenants to sell their estates free from encumbrances, so permitting the use of the land for mining and industrial production. That is an example of economic forces bringing about a far-reaching change in property relations and a transfer of power and initiative from the landed aristocracy to the rising middle class. Consider the rise of the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘What Can History Tell us about Contemporary Society’, in *On History*, London, Abacus, 1998, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1979.