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**The New Left: Beyond Stalinism and social democracy?**

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The British New Left emerged in 1956 as a response to a global ideological crisis that opened with Khrushchev’s secret speech, but which came to fruition when the revolutionary workers’ movement in Hungary was suppressed by Russian tanks on the same weekend that Anglo‑French troops invaded Egypt.[[1]](#endnote-1) Together these events created a space for a critique of the world system as a totality. In this context the New Left aimed, by contrast both with the Communist Party’s loyalty to Moscow and the Labour Party’s support for an Atlanticist foreign policy, at renewing socialism by mapping a third way beyond the polarities of the Cold War. Within eighteen months of this ideological break with Stalinism and social democracy, New Left activists began to test their ideas in a new mass movement: the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). It is difficult to imagine a more propitious encounter, for from early 1958 CND organised a series of marches that brought thousands of disaffected youth into conflict not only with the government but also with the leaderships of the Labour and Communist parties.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Though these developments opened a political space beyond the parameters of traditional politics, it wasn’t long before leading figures within the New Left and CND began to orientate towards the Labour Party as the most feasible vehicle for the advancement of the unilateralist cause.[[3]](#endnote-3) This perspective seemed close to realisation when, at the party’s 1960 conference, Labour’s right-wing leadership was defeated by the left in debates over motions on the party’s constitution and unilateral nuclear disarmament. As we shall see, many New Left intellectuals concluded not only that Labour might deliver on its unilateralist policies but also that it might become a vehicle for socialist advance.[[4]](#endnote-4)

At its heart, this perspective greatly underestimated the power of the right wing within the Labour Party machine. Indeed, once the right mobilised its forces at the 1961 party conference the left was easily defeated. While a more realistic left might have taken this defeat in its stride, because the New Left had put so much faith in their ability to win this vote it was dragged into the vortex of the Labour left’s defeat.[[5]](#endnote-5) Raymond Williams commented, ‘the reversal of the vote on nuclear disarmament in 1961 came as an astounding blow. There was no idea of the strengths of the Labour machine, or of the political skill with which the right was able to organise for victory within it’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Unfortunately, since this was as true for the leaders of CND as it was for the leaders of the New Left, defeat in the vote on unilateralism signalled the beginning of the end both for the former and the latter.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Thus it was that by the winter of 1961–2 the New Left, which had promised so much in 1956–7, was all but dead.[[8]](#endnote-8) This is not to say that the ‘political projects’ of the British New Left can be dismissed, in Eric Hobsbawm’s words, as no more than ‘a half-remembered footnote’,[[9]](#endnote-9) for the elements of the New Left milieu that best resisted the lure of Labourism did act as a bridge to the socialist movements of 1968. In this essay I argue that though the dominant voices within the New Left failed adequately to come to terms with the issues of Stalinism and reformism, this was not universally true. In particular, Alasdair MacIntyre’s critical defence of E.P. Thompson’s socialist humanism extended Thompson’s strategic insights in a direction that pointed towards the possibility of realising the New Left’s goal of renewing socialism beyond the parameters of Stalinism and social democracy. Unfortunately, MacIntyre’s insights have been obscured by the tendency amongst academics to reduce the New Left to writings in *New Left Review*, its predecessor magazines *Universities and Left Review* and *The Reasoner/New Reasoner*, and by extension *Socialist Register*. By contrast, Dorothy Thompson’s suggestion that the New Left should be conceived as a broad political milieu opens a space for grasping how it helped alter the subsequent ‘terms of political discourse’ in Britain.[[10]](#endnote-10) Following her lead I note the faltering links between the British new lefts of 1956 and 1968. I argue that the earlier movement marked a fork in the road at which a plurality of leftist currents momentarily converged through an attempt to map a left that was independent both of Stalinism and social democracy. Though the dominant voices within this milieu failed to transcend the limitations of these traditions, some of the minor voices did succeed in pointing beyond them, and in so doing provided a bridge between the New Left’s of 1956 and 1968.

**Third way socialism?**

Stuart Hall suggests that the New Left ‘attempted to define a “third” political space’ between the polarities of the Cold War politics as embodied in the ‘depressing experiences of both “actual existing socialism” and “actual existing social democracy”’.[[11]](#endnote-11) While this may have been the intention, Madeleine Davis points out that in practice the New Left had an ‘ambivalent’ relationship to the Labour Party.[[12]](#endnote-12) This is evident, for instance, in Edward Thompson’s introduction to the New Left collection *Out of Apathy* (1960). In this essay Thompson combines a powerful critique of the Labour Party’s existing policies, with a rather naive suggestion that, despite these policies, the Labour Party could be won to socialism.

Thompson opened the essay with an analysis of what he believed was one of the key political issues of the day: mass apathy. Defining apathy as the search for ‘private solutions to public evils’, he explained its contemporary prevalence, principally, as a function of a lack of real political alternatives for the electorate.[[13]](#endnote-13) Developing this theme, he suggested that a solution to the problem of apathy should begin by presenting the electorate with a real, viable political alternative to what the *Economist* labelled ‘Butskellism’: the consensus between the policies of the Labour and Tory chancellors Hugh Gaitskell and Rab Butler. Concretely, Thompson aimed to win over the Labour Party to the New Left’s vision of socialism. Thus he suggested that the transformation of Labour into a socialist party was not only possible, but also that this potential was being realised as he wrote: ‘Labour is ceasing to offer an alternative way of governing existing society, and is beginning to look for an alternative society’.[[14]](#endnote-14) He argued that the New Left’s role should be to encourage this process, while remaining aware that if his more optimistic perspective for the transformation of the Labour Party were frustrated ‘then new organisations will have to be created’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In retrospect this argument seems almost wilfully naive.[[16]](#endnote-16) If Thompson’s left-reformism had been but an idiosyncratic aberration it might justifiably be left to the enormous condescension of posterity. However, not only did Thompson’s politics show a marked continuity across his break with Stalinism, they also cohered with a wide swath of opinion amongst other New Left activists. And this perspective had roots in the dominant New Left critique of Stalinism.

Since the 1930s, the Stalinist Communist parties had embraced the ‘popular front’ line. This strategy, which was articulated in Russia with a view to winning an alliance with Britain and France against Germany, saw the Communist parties, which had already become subservient to Russia, transformed into what were in effect left-reformist organisations.[[17]](#endnote-17) Nevertheless, though the Communist parties generally, and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) more specifically, had long since ceased to be revolutionary organisations, they continued to deploy revolutionary rhetoric. This came to an end in Britain with the publication of the Party’s new programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, in 1951.[[18]](#endnote-18) This document marked an important turning point in Communist thinking: for the first time the CPGB made its break with revolutionary politics explicit. In part, this shift to a reformist strategy was underpinned by an argument, originating in Moscow but expressed in Britain by the CPGB general secretary Harry Pollitt, that the transitions to ‘Communism’ in Eastern Europe after the war had shown that ‘it is possible to see how the people will move towards socialism without further revolutions, without the dictatorship of the proletariat’.[[19]](#endnote-19) In an extension of this strategic ‘insight’, the CPGB argued that the Labour Party, once rid of its right-wing leadership, could act as the agency for the socialist transformation of society through parliament.[[20]](#endnote-20) In practice this meant, like the New Left, the CPGB became very excited at the prospects for a left advance in the Labour Party after the defeats of the right wing over the issues of clause four and unilateralism at the 1960 Labour Party conference. Indeed, John Gollan, who replaced Pollitt as CPGB general secretary in 1956, argued that the key political task in 1960 was to ‘redouble the struggle in the trade unions in support of the Scarborough decisions; to carry the struggle into the right-wing camp and win the trade unions now pledged to the right-wing policy for the Scarborough line’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

This perspective was somewhat contradictory for a supposedly Leninist organisation. For Lenin, the organisational forms taken by socialist groups derived from the nature of the political tasks they set themselves. Thus, a centralised party was a necessary prerequisite for a successful revolutionary challenge to state power, while parties that aimed only to reform the existing system could manage with a decentralised structure.[[22]](#endnote-22) Paradoxically, in 1950s Britain, the CPGB maintained the facade of Leninism, in its bastardised Stalinist form, through the adherence to a strong centralised party structure, while rejecting the revolutionary political content of Lenin’s thought.

But why should socialists remain wedded to a centralised organisation if its politics were reformist? The first New Leftist to point to the incoherence between the CPGB’s structure and its politics was Ken Alexander. He argued that while it was true that a Leninist party was a necessary prerequisite for the execution of a successful revolutionary strategy, once in power Leninist parties had acted and would inevitably act as agencies of the degeneration of the revolution into some form of totalitarianism.[[23]](#endnote-23) This argument implied that Marxism’s traditional rejection of the reformist alternative to revolutionary strategy had, as its corollary, the argument that Stalinism or something like it was the only conceivable alternative to capitalism. However, if, as the CPGB insisted, peaceful transitions to socialism had occurred in Eastern Europe, then not only was a new reformist socialist strategy conceivable, but it could also be imagined that this strategy might be prosecuted without a Leninist party.

Thus Alexander took Pollitt’s claim that the East European transitions had shown that revolutions were an unnecessary step on the road to socialism, and derived from it two conclusions. First, that history had moved on from Marx’s day – reformism had become a realistic socialist political strategy; and, second, that Lenin too had become equally redundant: centralised organisations were no longer the necessary evil through which socialists must fight for the overthrow of capitalism. This second conclusion was drawn coherently from Alexander’s old Stalinist frame of reference. If a revolutionary strategy had ceased to be the only realistic option open to socialist activists, revolutionary parties were becoming historically redundant. Indeed the only function of a Leninist party, according to Alexander, would be to act as the agency of the degeneration of socialist democracy in a post-capitalist regime.[[24]](#endnote-24) Alexander was therefore one of the first ex-Communists of the 1956 generation to generalise from the reformist assumptions of the CPGB to a critique of its formal Leninism.

Within the New Left, criticisms of Leninist organisational forms quickly merged into more general arguments against any strategy that aimed to build an independent socialist organisation. Indeed, Edward Thompson famously wrote that:

the New Left does not offer an alternative faction, party or leadership to those now holding the field ... once launched on the course of factionalism, it would contribute, not to the re‑unification of the socialist movement, but to its further fragmentation; it would contribute further to the alienation of the post‑war generation from the movement; and the established bureaucracies cannot be effectively challenged by their own methods ... The bureaucracy will hold the machine; but the New Left will hold the passes between it and the younger generation.

In fact, socialist intellectual work was not ‘best accomplished by joining anything’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Furthermore, Thompson argued that intellectuals ‘should not ask which party should I join? But what else shall I do to stir up the dormant socialist traditions of this country’?[[26]](#endnote-26)

Despite the stridency of his earlier opposition to building an independent party, by the end of the 1950s Thompson had moved to embrace some form of organisational politics. Thus, in his parting editorial for the last issue of *The New Reasoner*, published immediately prior to its merger with the *Universities and Left Review* to become *New Left Review*, he argued that ‘we think that the time has come for our readers, together with the readers of *ULR*, to pass over from diffuse discussion to political organisation. … We must now put this thinking to **use**, and carry it outward to the younger generation, and inward to the traditional labour movement. In particular we must establish far more contact between the New Left and the industrial working class’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Specifically, Thompson insisted, new activists ‘must learn from the steady attention to organisation, and from the true moral realism which has enabled men, year in and year out, to meet each situation as it has arisen’.[[28]](#endnote-28) And although he thus opened a space within the New Left for a serious engagement with the question of political organisation, his broad acceptance of the reformist assumptions expressed by Alexander, and indeed by Pollitt, meant that of one thing he was sure: a revived Leninism was not the answer.

Once the New Left had moved from acting merely as a loosely organised propaganda body towards political intervention proper, the problem of its factional nature came to the fore. The peculiar manner in which this occurred followed from the New Left’s structure: while it was only a very small milieu it boasted the affiliation of some very prominent activists. This was nowhere more pronounced than in Fife where Lawrence Daly, an important national figure both within the New Left and the National Union of Mineworkers, had a significant local following. Daly had left the CPGB in 1956 after years of activity, and in 1957 he set up the Fife Socialist League, through which he maintained both close links with the labour movement and ‘a vigorous correspondence in the local press on questions of national or international significance’.[[29]](#endnote-29) Combined with his local standing and his desire not to be labelled as a mere oppositionist, this assault quickly put him at the centre of local politics; a position from which, in 1958, he stood as a credible candidate for council. In the end Daly actually won the council seat; a victory which, in turn, set the stage for his ultimately unsuccessful stand against the sitting Labour MP in the 1959 general election. It was this act that put the issue of standing as a national alternative to Labour to the forefront of debates within the New Left.[[30]](#endnote-30)

A number of important New Left leaders chose to support Daly’s stand.[[31]](#endnote-31) This was a momentous choice; for any decision to stand against the Labour Party in an election was tantamount to a declaration of political war. However, the New Left’s support for Daly’s candidature was not unequivocal. Rather, many of the leading intellectuals argued that Fife was a unique case, and while they would support Daly this did not imply a universal break with the Labour Party. John Saville suggested that as it was a key role of the New Left to ‘recreate a vigorous movement for socialism amongst the ordinary people’, it should develop a body of ideas that was capable of refuting the dominant Fabian consensus in a language that was open to easy translation into cultural and political activity.[[32]](#endnote-32) Such a project could sometimes be best served by the New Left operating wholly within the Labour Party, sometimes wholly without and sometimes, probably mostly, ‘partly within, partly without’. Fundamentally, there were to be no organisational ‘sacred cows’ to which the New Left would bow.[[33]](#endnote-33) To counter the New Left’s weakness Saville argued for a flexible approach to politics. In West Fife, local conditions favoured standing a socialist candidate against the incumbent Labour MP: the sitting MP was not only a right‑winger, he was also distrusted by a large section of the local population; the Communist vote was declining; and finally, the weakness of the Tories in the area meant that even if the left’s vote was split three ways between Communist, Labour and socialist this would not have disastrous consequences as one of these three would still triumph.[[34]](#endnote-34)

However, Saville’s approach was not quite as flexible as it at first appeared. For in the midst of his essay he reaffirmed the New Left’s unwillingness to form a new party: ‘We have set our face against the development of a new political party; both our past history and our present analysis reject this’.[[35]](#endnote-35) So despite his support for Daly’s *de facto* party, Saville was wary of constituting the New Left as an independent organisation. While this position was reinforced by the sense of demoralisation felt by many New Leftists after Daly’s defeat in the parliamentary election, it was rooted in the reformist theoretical assumptions of the milieu from which the New Left sprang: assumptions that were inherited from the CPGB, and most powerfully articulated by Edward Thompson.

Thompson developed his analysis of the tasks of the contemporary left most eloquently in his essay *Revolution*. The explicit aim of this article was to steer a political course between the twin rocks of Leninist apocalyptic insurrectionism and Fabian evolutionism. If the essay’s title was meant as a challenge to Fabian gradualism, its substance was aimed at a series of Leninist political positions. Leninists, he argued, had seriously misconstrued the nature of the coming revolution, and consequentially they were incapable of adequately preparing for it. Thompson argued that the past century had been witness to a series of structural reforms that had been granted by capital to labour. These reforms were not the product of capital’s philanthropic nature; rather they were a corollary of its instinct for self-preservation: capital retreated, inch-by-inch, before the pressure for reform that originated at the base of society. The weakness with Fabianism did not lie in its belief in the possibility of reform; these all too palpably existed, but rather in its misdiagnosis of their cause. Leninism, meanwhile, was incapable of reorienting to the changed situation. In particular, Leninists could not comprehend the implications of the enormous reforms that had been brought about through the War: for it was in the period from 1942 to 1948 that the most significant reforms had been won. These changes allowed Thompson to look forward to a ‘peaceful revolution in Britain’.[[36]](#endnote-36) In fact, Thompson suggested, radical change could be instituted relatively easily:

the Establishment appears to rest upon an equilibrium of forces so delicate that it is forced to respond to determined pressure … if we nationalise … if we tax … if we contract out of NATO … At each point the initiative might provoke repercussions which would necessitate a total transformation of relations of production, forms of power, alliances and trade agreements, and institutions: that is, a socialist revolution.[[37]](#endnote-37)

If such a peaceful ‘revolution’ was possible, then what of the Labour Party; Britain’s traditional vehicle of reformist socialist aspirations? Against Thompson’s earlier rejection of the case for socialists joining any organisation, other prominent members of the New Left, such as Rodney Hilton and Mervyn Jones, argued that as the Labour Party was ‘still a mass movement of the British working class’, and ‘a battleground in which opposing trends are free to contend for leadership’, socialists should join it.[[38]](#endnote-38) These arguments seemed to be confirmed when the left won victories in the votes over clause four and unilateralism at the 1960 conference. Thus it was that even Ralph Miliband, just prior to the publication of his own powerful critique of Labourism, argued at the time that ‘it is not inevitable that the Labour Party should continue towards the political graveyard’. Moreover, he suggested that socialists might act to transform the party into a socialist organisation, ‘before it was too late’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Furthermore, in an argument first published in 1961, he argued that ‘the leadership whose purpose it is to reduce the Party’s commitment to socialist politics can no longer rely on the trade unions to help it in achieving its aims’.[[40]](#endnote-40) As we have seen, by 1960 Thompson appeared to have gravitated to a similar position; believing not only that the Labour Party might be won for the left but also that it might thereafter be used to win the battle for socialism.

John Rex made a similar argument for joining Labour. He began his case by noting, somewhat counter-intuitively, the ‘powerful system of bureaucratic control which operates within the party’: indeed, ‘the big unions or their officials do in fact control the Labour Party’. However, despite this structural limitation to the influence on policy by the ordinary members of the party, he argued that ‘we must either educate a new generation of socialists to take over the local and national party machine, the trade unions and the parliamentary party, or we must be prepared to set about the building of a new socialist party’. As he did not believe that there was much hope for the formation of a new socialist party, he aimed to build a strong socialist presence within the Labour Party: New Left activists should be prepared ‘to become collectors and ward secretaries as well as councillors and trade union officials’.[[41]](#endnote-41) Indeed, in a letter to their readers, *New Left Review’s* editors wrote that ‘the struggle for socialism is in a very important sense the struggle for the “soul of Labour”’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

So the bulk of the New Left followed Hilton and Jones to fight for the transformation of the Labour Party. Indeed Thompson interpreted the alarm bells sounding in the national press at the time as an indication that bourgeois society was becoming anxious of the developments within the Labour Party, developments which should therefore excite and energise the New Left.[[43]](#endnote-43) Moreover, victory over clause four and unilateralism at the 1960 conference seemed to confirm the general validity of the strategy for transforming Labour.[[44]](#endnote-44)

A year later, the editors of *New Left Review* found themselves politically paralysed when the right reasserted its control over the party through the medium of the trade union block vote at the 1961 conference.[[45]](#endnote-45) In these depressing circumstances the erstwhile activists of the New Left eagerly grasped at any sign, however meagre, of a revival in the fortunes of the left. It was thus with Gaitskell’s early death, and Harold Wilson’s election to the leadership of the Labour Party in 1963, that the reformist illusions that had previously opened the door to the New Left’s disastrous strategic goal of transforming the Labour Party into the agency of socialist transformation, now led them to believe that even in defeat the left had been victorious: Wilson it seemed was going to lead the left to the promised land; and from then onwards ‘all hopes were now focused on Labour’.[[46]](#endnote-46) Indeed, Perry Anderson, the new editor of *New Left Review*, wrote that Wilson had stepped into the fray just as the objective circumstances favoured the left as they had never done before. Therefore, he argued, Wilson ‘may in the end represent a certain moment in the auto emancipation of the working‑class movement in England’.[[47]](#endnote-47) So, by the early 1960s, the New Left’s aim of creating a socialist voice independent of both social democracy and Stalinism had collapsed into the train of Harold Wilson’s general election bandwagon.

**Beyond the Impasse**

The New Left’s trajectory from a critique of Leninism through left-reformism and on towards Wilson’s Labour Party was not in any sense preordained. Indeed, voices within the New Lew Left both criticised and pointed beyond this impasse. Thus, in 1963, Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that ‘to accept Wilsonism is to have moved over to the right at least for the moment no matter what other professions of socialism are made’.[[48]](#endnote-48) Like Thompson, MacIntyre had been a member of the CPGB, though he had left the party somewhat earlier. He subsequently joined with his erstwhile comrades after 1956 to become one of the most prominent voices on the far-left of the New Left milieu. It was from this perspective that he critically engaged with Thompson’s thought in a way that pointed beyond the limitations both of his politics specifically and the tendency within New Left circles towards a reconciliation with Labourism more broadly.

MacIntyre first outlined his thoughts in this direction through a critical engagement with Thompson’s ‘SocialistHumanism: An Epistle to the Philistines’ (1957). This essay was a brilliant and original contribution to both the analysis of Stalinism and to Marxist moral theory more generally. At its heart Thompson’s essay involved, as Kate Soper has argued, a reaffirmation of ‘moral autonomy and the powers of historical agency’ within historical materialism.[[49]](#endnote-49) According to Thompson, Stalinism was an ideology whose characteristic procedure was to start from abstract ideas rather than from facts. Moreover, this ideology represented the worldview of a ‘revolutionary elite which, within a particular historical context, degenerated into a bureaucracy’. The Stalinist bureaucracy had acted as a block on the struggle for socialism, and thus the human revolt which underpinned the struggle for socialism had become a revolt against Stalinism. Negatively, this revolt was a revolt against ideology and inhumanity. Positively, it involved a ‘return to man’, in the social sense understood by Marx. It was thus a socialist humanism: human, because it ‘places once again real men and women at the centre of socialist theory and aspiration’; socialist, because it ‘reaffirms the revolutionary perspectives of Communism’.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Whatever the obvious power of this argument, Thompson’s essay embraced a fatal contradiction, which even his grand rhetorical flourishes were unable fully to conceal. He opened his essay with the claim that one quarter of the earth’s surface was controlled by a new society, which, despite its many abhorrent features, represented a qualitative break with capitalism: ‘The instruments of production in the Soviet Union are socialised. The bureaucracy is not a class, but is parasitic upon that society. Despite its parasitism, the wave of human energy unleashed by the first socialist revolution has multiplied the wealth of society, and vastly enlarged the cultural horizons of the people’.[[51]](#endnote-51) However, in contrast to this characterisation of the Soviet system as at once socialist while yet morally unpalatable, he nevertheless insisted that ‘the “end” of Communism is not a “political” end, but a human end’.[[52]](#endnote-52) This formulation suggested a tremendous gap between the human ends of the Soviet experiment and the inhuman means through which these ends were, at least partially, being realised. Consequently, while Thompson implied that a plurality of means could be utilised to achieve the end of Communism, he was aware that these means were not morally equivalent. Concretely, in the Soviet case, he argued that the flaws of the Stalinist system could best be understood as a consequence of the inadequate model of Marxism that had guided the Bolsheviks. They, or so he claimed, had embraced a mechanical interpretation of Marx’s base-superstructure metaphor such that agency, in the form of the conscious activity of the masses, was lost, only to find expression through the monolithic party which became the guardian of true socialist consciousness. Following from this, the ‘immorality’ of replacing the actions of real individuals with those of cardboard abstractions became ‘embodied in institutional form in the rigid forms of “democratic centralism”’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Thus, Thompson’s moral critique of Stalinism involved a call both for a more flexible interpretation of Marx’s theory of history, and a rejection of the Leninist form of political organisation.

In *Notes From the Moral Wilderness*, MacIntyre aimed to extend and make more coherent some of the themes opened by Thompson in light of criticisms made of the piece by Harry Hanson, Charles Taylor and others.[[54]](#endnote-54) The substance of MacIntyre’s argument was an attempt to provide a basis for a moral critique of Stalinism that overcame the limitations of the implied Kantianism of those ‘ex-Communist turned moral critics of Communism’, who ‘repudiate Stalinist crimes in the name of moral principle; but the fragility of their appeal to moral principles lies in the apparently arbitrary nature of that appeal’.[[55]](#endnote-55) Such an ethical socialism, he believed, required a reassessment of historical materialism. In place of the orthodox interpretation of historical materialism, MacIntyre insisted that if the moral core of Marxist political theory was to be retrieved and reconstructed from the fragments that Marx had written on the subject then it must be carried out alongside a similar reconstruction of Marx’s theory of history.

MacIntyre suggested that the Stalinists had, through the medium of a teleological vision of historical progress, identified ‘what is morally right with what is actually going to be the outcome of historical development’, such that the ‘“ought” of principle is swallowed up in the “is” of history’.[[56]](#endnote-56) It was not enough to add something like Kant’s ethics to this existing Stalinist theory of historical development if one wished to reassert moral principle into Marxism, for this theory of history negated moral choice. However, neither was it right to reject, as immoral, any historical event from some supposed higher standpoint, as ‘there is no set of common, public standards to which [one] can appeal’. Indeed, any such manoeuvre would tend to gravitate to an existing tradition of morality which, because these had generally evolved to serve some particular dominant class interests, would ‘play into the hands of the defenders of the established order’.[[57]](#endnote-57) Therefore, MacIntyre suggested, apologists for both the East and the West in the Cold War based their arguments upon inadequate theoretical frameworks. A ‘third moral position’ could thus be constructed by ‘replacing a misconceived but prevalent view of what Marxism is by a more correct view’.[[58]](#endnote-58)

The Stalinist insistence that history’s general course was predictable rested, or so MacIntyre insisted, on a misconception of the role of the base-superstructure metaphor in Marxist theory. What Marx suggested when he deployed this metaphor was neither a mechanical nor a causal relationship. Rather, he utilised Hegelian concepts to denote the process through which society’s economic base provides ‘a framework within which superstructures arise, a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, a kernel of human relationships from which all else grows’. Indeed, MacIntyre wrote that in ‘creating the basis, you create the superstructure. These are not two activities but one’. Thus, the Stalinist model of historical progress, according to which political developments were understood to follow automatically from economic causes, could not be further from Marx’s model: in Marx’s view, ‘the crucial character of the transition to socialism is not that it is a change in the economic base but that it is a revolutionary change in the relation of base to superstructure’.[[59]](#endnote-59) This approach to ethics was intended to point beyond the contemporary moral impasse where ‘both the autonomy of ethics and utilitarianism are aspects of the consciousness of capitalism; both are forms of alienation rather than moral guides’.[[60]](#endnote-60) So, once the political left has rid itself both of the myth of the inevitable triumph of socialism, and of the reification of socialism as some indefinite end which justifies any action taken in its name, then socialists will truly comprehend the interpenetration of means and ends through the history of class struggle, and will understand Marxist morality to be, as against the Stalinists, ‘an assertion of moral absolutes’, and ‘as against the liberal critic of Stalinism it is an assertion of desire and history’.[[61]](#endnote-61)

The political corollary of this theoretical argument was a restatement of Marx’s view that socialism could only come through the self emancipation of the working class. As MacIntyre wrote a few years later in a review of the final volume of Isaac Deutscher’s biography of Trotsky, ‘socialism can be made only by the workers and not for them’.[[62]](#endnote-62) Consequently, in extending Thompson’s humanist reinterpretation of Marx, MacIntyre suggested an absolute rupture with Stalinism that went beyond anything that Thompson had written on the subject. Whereas Thompson insisted that ‘the October Revolution and its aftermath in East Europe and the Chinese Revolution have effected a fundamental revolution in property relations, and have vastly increased the real potential for intellectual, cultural and democratic advance within these societies’, MacIntyre argued that Marx’s model of socialism as proletarian self-emancipation ‘marks a decisive opposition to Fabianism and all other doctrines of “socialism from above”’.[[63]](#endnote-63) By thus rejecting the socialist credentials of the Stalinist states, MacIntyre could not accept the New Left assumption that peaceful transitions to socialism had been realised by Russian tanks in Eastern Europe.

This perspective laid the groundwork for his critique of Thompson’s hopes for the Labour Party. For if the East European states were not socialist then the claim that their recent history could be mined for examples of a viable reformist strategy fell. This argument, in turn, informed MacIntyre’s reassessment of Lenin’s legacy; and, in particular, his attempt to unpick Lenin’s model of democratic revolutionary leadership from the Stalinist ideology of Leninism. In his essay ‘Freedom and Revolution’ (1960), MacIntyre argued that because capitalism emasculates freedom, to be free means to involve oneself in some organisation that challenges capitalist relations of production: ‘The topic of freedom is also the topic of revolution’. More concretely, he argued that though the working class, through its struggles against capital, might spontaneously generate emancipatory movements, it has proved incapable of spontaneously realising the potential of these struggles. Assuming, with Marx, that freedom cannot be handed to the working class from above, how then might it be realised from such unpromising material? MacIntyre answered that socialists must join revolutionary parties, whose goal is not freedom itself, but to act in such a way as to aid the proletariat to achieve freedom: ‘the path to freedom must be by means of an organisation which is dedicated not to building freedom but to moving the working class to build it. The necessity for this is the necessity for a vanguard party’. Indeed, MacIntyre suggested that ‘the road to socialism and democratic centralism are … inseparable’.[[64]](#endnote-64)

**Conclusion**

The dominant themes of the New Left critique of Leninism were rooted in the Stalinist assumption that peaceful a transition to ‘socialism’ in Eastern Europe entailed that reformism was viable strategy for socialism elsewhere in Europe and consequently that Lenin’s revolutionary perspective was obsolete. It is hardly surprising that this standpoint opened the door initially to a rapprochement with social democracy and subsequently to a full scale collapse into the train of Wilson’s Labour Party. One consequence of this process was that though the two journals most associated with the legacy of the New Left, *Socialist Register* and *New Left Review*, flourished in the decades after its demise, they never again became the focus of a socialist *movement*.[[65]](#endnote-65)

By contrast with this trajectory, MacIntyre’s defence of Leninism was predicated upon root and branch criticisms both of the view that the Stalinist states were in any sense socialist and of Stalin’s distortion of Lenin’s theory and practice into the ideology of ‘Leninism’. This argument informed his decision to join the International Socialism group in 1960.[[66]](#endnote-66) As I have argued elsewhere, this group came closest to realising the New Left’s hope of building a socialist movement independent both of social democracy and Stalinism. And though MacIntyre gave up on his wager on the working class in the mid-1960s, the upsurge in working-class militancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s marked the point at which the ‘International Socialism group’ began *mutatis mutandis* to realise its potential, as John Saville suggested it might do, of making ‘the transition from a fairly open sect to something approaching a small party’.[[67]](#endnote-67) In so doing it showed that the left was able to move beyond the impasse that the New Left had found itself in the early 1960s without embracing the revisionism of those post-Marxists who saw this impasse as evidence of a ‘fundamentally altered landscape’ whose co-ordinates negated Marx’s vision of ‘socialism form below’.[[68]](#endnote-68)

1. **Notes**

   This essay draws on various of my earlier articles including ‘Morality and Revolution: Ethical Debates in the British New Left’, *Critique*, 35, 2 (2007); ‘Alasdair MacIntyre: Marxism and Politics’, *Studies in Marxism*, 11 (2007); ‘The New Left’s Renewal of Marxism’, *International Socialism*, 2, 112 (2006); ‘Freedom, Desire and Revolution: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Early Marxist Ethics’, *History of Political Thought*, XXVI, 4 (2005); ‘Reform, Revolution and the Question of Organisation in the First New Left’, *Contemporary Politics*, 10, 1 (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Both Labour and Communist parties initially opposed CND’s demand for unilateral nuclear disarmament. W. Thompson, *The Long Death of British Labourism* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p. 116, and W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism, 1920–91* (London: Pluto Press, 1992)*,* p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. R. Hilton, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals – Four’, *Universities and Left Review*, 2, (1957), p. 20; M. Jones, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals - One’, *Universities and Left Review*, 2 (1957), p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lin Chun has suggested that the Labour Party ‘left too little room for the construction of an organisationally based New Left politics’. As we shall see, the truth is that the dominant voices within the New Left never had the theoretical resources to begin such a project. See L. Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. xvii. This also explains why, in Michael Kenny’s words, why ‘much of its energy was expended as a lobbying group, conscience and critic of Labour’. See M. Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals after Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), p. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. P. Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. R. Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 1979) p. 365. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. J. Hinton, *Protests and Visions* (London, Hutchinson, 1989), p. 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. P. Sedgwick, ‘The Two New Lefts’, in D. Widgery (ed.), *The Left in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. E. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (London: Abacus, 2002), p. 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. D. Thompson, ‘On the Trail of the New Left’, *New Left Review*, 1, 215 (1996), p. 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. S. Hall, ‘The “First” New Left: Life and Times’, in Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group (eds), *Out of Apathy* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 13–23. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. M. Davis, ‘Labourism and the New Left’, in J. Callaghan *et al* eds., *Interpreting the Labour Party* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 39; 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. E.P. Thompson, ‘At the Point of Decay’, in E.P. Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1960), pp. 5–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, p. 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. F. Claudin, *The Communist Movement* (London: Penguin, 1975); D. Hallas, *The Comintern* (London: Bookmarks, 1985); C.L.R. James, *World Revolution* (New Jersey: The Humanities Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism* (London: Communist Party, 1952). Both critics and supporters of the ‘popular front’ line embraced by the Comintern in the 1930s are agreed that it marked a qualitative break with the tradition of revolutionary socialism. See E. Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left* (London: Verso, 1989); L. Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973 edition). Others have argued that the right turn in Comintern strategy taken in 1924, and the ‘third period’ policy of 1928–34, both, in their own ways, marked the retreat of the Comintern from its earlier revolutionary politics. See James, *World Revolution*, p. 217; Hallas, *The Comintern*, p. 126. Nevertheless, Willie Thompson is right to stress the importance of the political shift that occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Thompson, *The Good Old Cause*, p. 10). There were two new programmatic developments in the CPGB in this period: first, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was explicitly dropped from the party’s programme; and, second, within the *British Road to Socialism* there was a deployment of evidence based upon the supposed success of the ‘people’s front’ policy in Eastern Europe. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Quoted in J. Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. J. Gollan, *Which Way for Socialists?* (London: Communist Party, 1960). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. J. Golan, *Gaitskell or Socialism?* (London: Communist Party, 1960), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. P. Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1990), p. 44. See also T. Cliff, *Lenin: Building the Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), p. 84; N. Harding, *Lenin’s Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 137; M. Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. K. Alexander, ‘Democratic Centralism’, *The Reasoner* 1 (1956), p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. E.P. Thompson, ‘The New Left’, *The New Reasoner*, 9 (1959),pp. 15–17; idem, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals’, *Universities and Left Review*, 1 (1957), p. 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. E.P. Thompson, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals – A Reply’, *Universities and Left Review*, 2 (1957), p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. E.P. Thompson, ‘A Psessay in Ephology’, *The New Reasoner*, 10 (1959), pp. 5–6. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. E.P. Thompson, ‘Commitment in Politics’, *Universities and Left Review*, 6 (1959), p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. J. Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin Press 2003), pp. 120–1. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 40. Daly’s call, in late 1958, to build ‘a genuinely revolutionary socialist party’ was dismissed even on the Trotskyist left (Callaghan, *British Trotskyism*, p. 74). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. J. Saville, ‘A Note on West Fife’, *The New Reasoner*, 10 (1959)*,* p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid, p. 12; J. Saville, ‘Apathy into Politics’, *New Left Review*, I, 4 (1960). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Saville, ‘A Note on West Fife’, p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Thompson, ‘Revolution’, Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy*, p. 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Thompson, ‘At the Point of Decay’, in Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy*, pp. 8–10. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. R. Hilton, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals – Four’, *Universities and Left Review*, 2 (1957), p. 20; M. Jones, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals – One’, *Universities and Left Review*, 2, (1957), p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. R. Miliband, ‘The Sickness of Labourism’, *New Left Review*, I, 1 (1960), p. 8; M. Newman, *Ralph Miliband and the Politics of the New Left* (London, Merlin Press, 2002), p. 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London, Merlin Press, 1972), p. 346. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. J. Rex, ‘The Labour Bureaucracy’, in *The New Reasoner,* 6 (1958) pp. 49–60. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *New Left Review*, ‘Letter to Readers’, *New Left Review*, I, 2 (1960), p. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. E.P. Thompson, ‘Revolution Again’, *New Left Review*, 1, 6 (1960), p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *New Left Review* , ‘The Consequences of a Conference’, Editorial *New Left Review*, I, 6 (1960). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. P. Anderson, ‘The Left in the Fifties’, *New Left Review*,I, 29 (1965), p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. R. Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1988), p. 61. Dorothy Thompson, speaking at The British Marxist Historians and the New Social Movements conference at Edge Hill College in June 2002, recounted the story of the night that she, Edward Thompson, Robin Blackburn and Perry Anderson euphorically celebrated Wilson’s victory in the 1963 Labour Party leadership election. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. P. Anderson, ‘Critique of Wilsonism’, *New Left Review*, I, 27 (1964), p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. A. MacIntyre [1963], ‘Labour Policy and Capitalist Planning’, in P. Blackledge & N. Davidson (eds), *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 285; P. Foot, T*he Politics of Harold Wilson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 317. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. K. Soper, *Troubled Pleasures* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. E.P. Thompson, ‘Socialist Humanism’ *The New Reasoner*, 1 (1957), pp. 107–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid, pp. 105–38. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid, p. 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid, p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. H. Hanson, ‘An Open Letter’, *The New Reasoner*, 2 (1957); C. Taylor, ‘Marxism and Humanism’, *The New Reasoner*, 2 (1957); idem, ‘Socialism and Intellectuals – Three’, *Universities and Left Review*, 2 (1957). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. A. MacIntyre [1959], ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’, in Blackledge & Davidson (eds), *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid, p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid, p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid, p. 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid, p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid, p. 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. A. MacIntyre [1963], ‘Trotsky in Exile’, in Blackledge & Davidson (eds), *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, p. 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. E.P. Thompson, ‘Agency and Choice’, *The New Reasoner*, 5 (1958), p. 93; A. MacIntyre, Alasdair [1964], ‘Marx’, in Blackledge & Davidson (eds), *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, p. 297. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. A. MacIntyre [1960], ‘Freedom and Revolution’,in Blackledge & Davidson (eds), *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism*, pp. 123–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. P. Blackledge, ‘On Moving On from “Moving On”: Miliband, Marxism and Politics’, in C. Barrow *et al* (eds)., *Class, Power and State in Capitalist Society: Essays on Ralph Miliband* (London: Palgrave, 2008); P. Blackledge, *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left*, London: Merlin, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. P. Blackledge ‘Freedom, Desire and Revolution: Alasdair MacIntyre’s Early Marxist Ethics’ [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. J. Saville, ‘Britain: Prospects for the Seventies’, Socialist Register (1970), p. 208; For a survey of the ideas of the International Socialism group (latterly the Socialist Workers Party) in this period, see N. Harris and J. Palmer (eds), *World Crisis* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1971). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Compare the conclusions of my ‘The New Left’s Renewal of Marxism’ with those of Kenny’s *The First New Left*, p. 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)