

MY CORRECT VIEWS ON EVERYTHING

A Rejoinder to Edward Thompson's "Open Letter to Leszek
Kolakowski"

Leszek Kolakowski

Dear Edward Thompson,

Why I am not very happy about this public correspondence is because your letter deals as much (at least) with personal attitudes as with ideas. However I have no personal accounts to settle either with Communist ideology or with the year 1956; this was settled long ago. But if you insist,

Let us begin and carry up this corpse
Singing together. . . .

In a review of the last issue of *Socialist Register* by Raymond Williams, I read that your letter is one of the best pieces of Left writings in the last decade, which implies directly that all or nearly all the rest was worse. He knows better and I take his word. I should be proud to have occasioned, to a certain degree, this text, even if I happen to be its target. And so, my first reaction is one of gratitude.

My second reaction is of *embarras de richesses*. You will excuse me if I make a fair choice of topics in my reply to your 100 pages of the Open Letter (not well segmented, as you will admit). I will try to take up the most controversial ones. I do not think I should comment on the autobiographical pages, interesting though they are. When you say, e.g. that you do not go to Spain for holidays, that you never attend a conference of Socialists without paying a part of the costs out of your own pocket, that you do not participate in meetings funded by the Ford Foundation, that you are like Quakers of old who refused to take off their hats before authorities, etc., I do not think it advisable to reply with a virtue-list of my own; this list would probably be less impressive. Neither am I going to exchange the story of your dismissal from the *New Left Review* for all the stories of my expulsions from different editorial committees of different journals; these stories would be rather trivial.

My third reaction is of sadness and I mean it. Incompetent though I am in your field of studies, I know your reputation as a scholar and

historian and I found it regrettable to see in your Letter so many Leftist clichés which survive in speech and print owing to three devices: first, the refusal to analyse words-and the use of verbal hybrids purposely designed to confound the issues; second, the use of moral or sentimental standards in some cases and of political and historical standards in other similar cases; third, the refusal to accept historical facts as they are. I will try to say more precisely what I mean.

Your letter contains some personal grievances and some arguments on general questions. I will start with a minor personal grievance. Oddly enough, you seem to feel offended by not having been invited to the Reading conference and you state that if you had been invited you would have refused to attend anyway, on serious moral grounds. I presume, consequently, that if you had been invited, you would have felt offended as well and so, no way out of hurting you was open to the organizers. Now, the moral ground you cite is the fact that in the organizing Committee you found the name of Robert Cecil. And what is sinister about Robert Cecil is that he once worked in the British diplomatic service. And so, your integrity does not allow you to sit at the same table with someone who used to work in British diplomacy. O, blessed Innocence! You and I, we were both active in our respective Communist Parties in the 40s and 50s which means that, whatever our noble intentions and our charming ignorance (or refusal to get rid of ignorance) were, we supported, within our modest means, a regime based on mass slave labour and police terror of the worst kind in human history. Do you not think that there are many people who could refuse to sit at the same table with us on this ground? No, you are innocent, while I do not feel, as you put it, the "sense of the politics of those years" when so many Western intellectuals were converted to Stalinism.

Your "sense of politics of those years" is obviously subtler and more differentiated than mine, I gather this from your casual comments on Stalinism. First, you say, that a part (a part, I do not omit that) of responsibility for Stalinism lies upon the Western powers. You say, second, that "to a historian, fifty years is too short a time in which to judge a new social system, if such a system is arising". Third, we know, as you say, "times when communism has shown a most human face, between 1917 and the early 1920s and again from the battle of Stalingrad to 1946".

Everything is right on some additional assumptions. Obviously, in the world in which we live, important events in one country are usually to be credited in part to what happened in other countries. You will certainly not deny that a part of the responsibility for German Nazism lay upon the Soviet Union; I wonder how this affects your judgement on German Nazism?

Your second comment is revealing, indeed. What is fifty years "to a historian"? The same day as I am writing this, I happen to have read a book by Anatol Marchenko, relating his experiences in Soviet prisons and concentration camps in the early 1960s (not 1930s). The book was published in Russian in Frankfurt in 1973. The author, a Russian worker, was caught when he tried to cross the Soviet border to Iran. He was lucky to have done it in Khrushchev's time, when the regrettable errors of J. V. Stalin were over (yes, regrettable, let us face it, even if in part accounted for by the Western powers), and so, he got only six years of hard labour in a concentration camp. One of his stories is about three Lithuanian prisoners who tried to escape from the convoy in a forest. Two of them were quickly caught, then shot many times in the legs, then ordered to get up which they could not do, then kicked and trampled by guards, then bitten and torn up by police dogs (such an amusement, survival of capitalism) and only then stabbed to death with bayonets. All this with witty remarks by the officer, of the kind "Now, free Lithuania, crawl, you'll get your independence straight off!" The third prisoner was shot and, reputed to be dead, was thrown under corpses in the cart; discovered later to be alive he was not killed (de-stalinization!) but left for several days in a dark cell with his festering wound and he survived after his arm was cut off.

This is one of thousand stories you can read in many now available books. Such books are rather reluctantly read by the enlightened Leftist elite, both because they are largely irrelevant, they supply us only with small details (and, after all, we agree that some errors were committed) and because many of them have not been translated (did you notice that if you meet a Westerner who learnt Russian you have at least 90% chance of meeting a bloody reactionary? Progressive people do not enjoy this painful effort of learning Russian, they know better anyway).

And so, what is fifty years to a historian? Fifty years covering the life of an obscure Russian worker Marchenko or of a still more obscure Lithuanian student who has not even written a book? Let us not hurry with judging a "new social system". Certainly I could ask you how many years you needed to assess the merits of the new military regime in Chile or in Greece, but I know your answer: no analogy, Chile and Greece remain within capitalism (factories are privately owned) while Russia started a new "alternative society" (factories are state owned and so is land and so are all its inhabitants). As genuine historians we can wait for another century and keep our slightly melancholic but cautiously optimistic historical wisdom.

Not so, of course, with "that beast", "that old bitch, consumer capitalism" (your words). Wherever we look, our blood is boiling. Here we may afford to be ardent moralists again and we can prove—as

you do—that the capitalist system has a "logic" of its own that all reforms are unable to cancel. The national health service, you say, is impoverished by the existence of private practice, equality in education is spoilt because people are trained for private industry etc. You do not say that all reforms are doomed to failure, you only explain that as long as reforms do not destroy capitalism, capitalism is not destroyed, which is certainly true. And you propose "a peaceful revolutionary transition to an alternative socialist logic". You think apparently that this makes perfectly clear what you mean; I think, on the contrary, that it is perfectly obscure unless, again, you imagine that once the total state ownership of factories is granted, there remain only minor technical problems on the road to your utopia. But this is precisely what remains to be proved and the *onus probandi* lies on those who maintain that these (insignificant "to a historian") fifty years of experience may be discarded by the authors of the new blueprint for the socialist society (In Russia there were "exceptional circumstances", weren't there? But there is nothing exceptional about Western Europe).

Your way of interpreting these modest fifty years (fifty-seven now) of the new alternative society is revealed as well in your occasional remarks about the "most human face of communism" between 1917 and the early '20s and between Stalingrad and 1946. What do you mean by "human face" in the first case? The attempt to rule the entire economy by police and army, resulting in mass hunger with uncountable victims, in several hundred peasants' revolts, all drowned in blood (a total economic disaster, as Lenin would admit later, after having killed and imprisoned an indefinite number of Mensheviks and SRs for predicting precisely that)? Or do you mean the armed invasion of seven non-Russian countries which had formed their independent governments, some socialist, some not (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia; O God, where are all these curious tribes living)? Or do you mean the dispersion by soldiers of the only democratically elected Parliament in Russian history, before it could utter one single word? The suppression by violence of all political parties, including socialist ones, the abolition of the non-Bolshevik press and, above all, the replacement of law with the absolute power of the party and its police in killing, torturing and imprisoning anybody they wanted? The mass repression of the Church? The Kronstadt uprising? And what is the most human face in 1942–46? Do you mean the deportation of eight entire nationalities of the Soviet Union with hundreds of thousands of victims (let us say seven, not eight, one was deported shortly before Stalingrad)? Do you mean sending to concentration camps hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war handed over by the Allies? Do you mean the so-called collectivization of the Baltic countries if you have an idea about the reality of this word?

I have three possible explanations of your statement. First, that you are simply ignorant of these facts; this I find incredible, considering your profession of historian. Second, that you use the word "human face" in a very Thompsonian sense which I do not grasp. Third, that you, not unlike most of both orthodox and critical communists, believe that everything is all right in the Communist system as long as the leaders of the party are not murdered. This is, in fact, the standard way of how communists become "critical": when they realize that the new alternative socialist logic does not spare the communists themselves and in particular party leaders. Did you notice that the only victims Khrushchev mentioned by name in his speech of 1956 (whose importance I am far from underestimating) were the Stalinists *pur sang* like himself, most of them (like Postychev) hangmen of merit with uncountable crimes committed before they became victims themselves? Did you notice, in memoirs or critical analyses written by many ex-communists (I will not quote names, excuse me) that their horror only suddenly emerged when they saw communists being slaughtered? They always are pleading the innocence of the victims by saying "but these people were communists"! (Which, incidentally, is a self-defeating way of defence, for it suggests that there is nothing wrong in slaughtering non-communists, and this implies that there is an authority to decide who is and who is not a communist, and this authority can be only the same rulers who keep the gun; consequently, the slaughtered are by definition non-communists and everything is all right.)

Well, Thompson, I really do not attribute to you this way of thinking. Still I cannot help noticing your use of double standards of evaluation. And when I say "double standards" I do not mean indulgence for the justifiable inexperience of the "new society" in coping with new problems. I mean the use, alternatively, of political or moral standards to similar situations and this I find unjustifiable. We must not be fervent moralists in some cases and Real-politikers or philosophers of world history in others, depending on political circumstances. This is a point I would like to make clear to you if we are to understand each other. I will quote to you (from memory) a talk with a Latin-American revolutionary who told me about torture in Brazil. I asked: "What is wrong with torture?" and he said: "What do you mean? Do you suggest it is all right? Are you justifying torture?" And I said: "On the contrary, I simply ask you if you think that torture is a morally inadmissible monstrosity." "Of course," he replied. "And so is torture in Cuba?", I asked. "Well, he answered, this is another thing. Cuba is a small country under the constant threat of American imperialists. They have to use all means of self-defence, however regrettable."

Then I said: "Now, you cannot have it both ways. If you believe, as I do, that torture is abominable and inadmissible on moral grounds,

it is such, by definition, in all circumstances. If however there are circumstances where it can be tolerated, you can condemn no regime for the very fact of applying torture, since you assume that there is nothing essentially wrong with torture itself. Either you condemn torture in Cuba in exactly the same way you do for Brazil, or you prevent yourself from condemning the Brazilian police for the very fact of torturing people. In fact, you cannot condemn torture on political grounds, because in most cases it is perfectly efficient and the torturers get what they want. You can condemn it only on moral grounds and then, necessarily, everywhere in the same way, in Batista's Cuba or in Castro's Cuba, in North Vietnam and in South Vietnam."

This is a banal but important point which I hope is clear to you. I simply refuse to join people who show how their hearts are bleeding to death when they hear about any, big or minor (and rightly condemnable) injustice in the US and suddenly become wise historiosophists or cool rationalists when told about worse horrors of the new alternative society.

This is one, but not the only one, reason of the spontaneous and almost universal mistrust people from Eastern Europe nourish towards the Western New Left. By a strange coincidence the majority of these ungrateful people, once they come to or settle in Western Europe or in the US, pass for reactionaries. These narrow empiricists and egoists extrapolate a poor few decades of their petty personal experience (logically inadmissible, as you rightly notice) and find in it pretexts to cast doubts on the radiant socialist future elaborated on the best Marxist-Leninist grounds by ideologists of the New Left for the Western countries.

This is a topic I will pursue somewhat further. I assume that we do not differ in accepting facts as they are and that we do not get knowledge of the existing societies by the deduction from a general theory. (Again, I will quote my talk with a Maoist from India. He said: "The cultural revolution in China was a class struggle of poor peasants against kulaks." I asked: "How do you know that?", and he replied: "From Marxist-Leninist theory." I commented: "Yes, that is what I guessed." He did not understand, but you do.) This is not enough, however, for, as you know, any properly vague ideology is always able to absorb (meaning: to discard) all facts without giving up any of its ingredients. And the trouble is that most people are not dedicated ideologists. Their shallow minds work in such a way as if they believed that nobody has ever seen capitalism or socialism but only sets of small facts they are incapable of interpreting theoretically. They simply notice that people in some countries are better off than in others, that in some of them production, distribution and services are much more efficient than in others, that here people enjoy civil and human rights

and freedom and there they do not. (I should rather say "freedom" in quotation marks, as you do; I do realize that this is a part of the absolutely obligatory Leftist spelling, to use the word "freedom" in quotation marks when applied to Western Europe; what a "freedom", indeed, enough to burst one's sides with laughter. And we, people without sense of humour, do not laugh.)

I do not try to make you believe that you live in paradise and we in hell. In my country, Poland, we do not suffer hunger, people are not being tortured in prisons, we have no concentration camps (in contrast to Russia), in the last couple of years we have had only few political prisoners (in contrast to Russia), and many people go abroad relatively easily (again, in contrast to Russia). Still, we are a country deprived of sovereignty, and this not in the sense Mr Foot and Mr Powell fear that Britain could lose her sovereignty because of joining the Common Market, but in a sadly direct and palpable sense: in that all key sectors of our life, including the army, foreign policy, foreign trade, important industries and ideology, are under tight control of a foreign empire which exerts its power with a considerable meticulousness (e.g. preventing specific books from being published or specific information from being divulged, not to speak of more serious matters). Still, we appreciate immensely our margins of freedom when we compare our position with that of entirely liberated countries like the Ukraine or Lithuania which, as far as their right to self-government is concerned, are in a much worse situation than the old colonies of the British empire were. And the point is that these margins, important though they are (we can still say and publish significantly more than people elsewhere in the rouble zone, except for Hungary), are not supported by any legal guarantees at all and can be (as they used to be) cancelled overnight by a decision taken by party rulers in Warsaw or in Moscow. And this is simply because we got rid of this fraudulent bourgeois device of the division of powers and we achieved the socialist dream of unity, which means that the same apparatus has all legislative, executive and judicial power in addition to its power of controlling all means of production; the same people make law, interpret it and enforce it; king, Parliament, army chief, judge, prosecutor, policeman and (new socialist invention) owner of all national wealth and the only employer at one and the same desk—what better social unity can you imagine?

You are proud of not going to Spain for political reasons. Unprincipled as I am, I was there twice. It is unpleasant to say that this regime, oppressive and undemocratic though it is, gives its citizens more freedom than any socialist country (except, perhaps, for Yugoslavia). I am not saying this with *Schadenfreude*, but with shame, keeping in mind the pathos of the civil war. The Spaniards have the frontiers open (never mind the reason which is, in this case, thirty

million tourists each year) and no totalitarian system can work with open frontiers. They have censorship after, and not before, publication (my own book was published in Spain and then confiscated, but after one thousand copies had been sold; we all should like to have the same conditions in Poland) and you find in Spanish bookshops Marx, Trotsky, Freud, Marcuse etc. Like us, they have no elections and no legal political parties but, unlike us, they have many forms of organization which are independent of the state and the ruling party. They are sovereign as a state.

You will probably say that I am talking in vain because you clearly stated that you are far from seeing your ideal in the existing socialist states and that you were thinking in terms of a democratic socialism. You did, indeed, and I am not accusing you of being an admirer of the socialist secret police. Still, what I am trying to say is very relevant to your article for two reasons. First, you consider the existing socialist states as (imperfect, to be sure) beginnings of a new and better social order, as transitional forms which went beyond capitalism and are heading towards utopia. I do not deny that this form is new but I do deny that it is in any respect superior to the democratic countries of Europe and I defy you to prove the opposite, i.e. to show a point in which the existing socialism may claim its superiority, except for the notorious advantages all despotic systems have over democratic ones (less trouble with people). The second, and equally important, point is that you pretend to know what democratic socialism means to you and you do not know. You write: "My own utopia, two hundred years ahead, would not be like Morris's 'epoch of rest'. It would be a world (as D. H. Lawrence would have it) where the 'money values' give way before the 'life values', or (as Blake would have it) 'corporeal' will give way to 'mental' war. With sources of power easily available, some men and women might choose to live in unified communities, sited, like Cistercian monasteries, in centres of great natural beauty, where agricultural, industrial and intellectual pursuits might be combined. Others might prefer the variety and pace of an urban life which rediscovers some of the qualities of the city-state. Others will prefer a life of seclusion, and many will pass between all three. Scholars would follow the disputes of different schools, in Paris, Jakarta or Bogota."

This is a very good sample of socialist writing. It amounts to saying that the world should be good, and not bad, and I am entirely on your side on this issue. I share without restrictions your (and Marx's, and Shakespeare's, and many others') analysis to the effect that it is very deplorable that people's minds are occupied with the endless pursuit of money, that needs have a magic power of infinite growth, and that the profit motive, instead of use-value, is ruling production. Your superiority consists in that you know exactly how to get rid of all this and I do not.

Why the problems of the real and the only existing communism which Leftist ideologists put aside so easily ("all right, this was done in exceptional circumstances, we won't imitate these patterns, we will do better" etc) are crucial for socialist thought is because the experiences of the "new alternative society" have shown very convincingly that the only universal medicine these people have for social evils—state ownership of the means of production—is not only perfectly compatible with all disasters of the capitalist world, with exploitation, imperialism, pollution, misery, economic waste, national hatred and national oppression, but that it adds to them a series of disasters of its own: inefficiency, lack of economic incentives and, above all, the unrestricted role of the omnipotent bureaucracy, a concentration of power never known before in human history. Just a stroke of bad luck? No, you do not say exactly so, you simply prefer to ignore the problem and rightly so, because all attempts to examine this experience lead us back not only to contingent historical circumstances but to the very idea of socialism and the discovery of incompatible demands hidden in this idea (or at least demands whose compatibility remains to be proved). We want a society with a large autonomy of small communities, do we not? And we want central planning in the economy. Let us try to think now how both work together. We want technical progress and we want perfect security for people; let us look closer how both could be combined. We want industrial democracy and we want efficient management: do they work well together? Of course they do, in the leftist heaven everything is compatible and everything settled, lamb and lion sleep in the same bed. Look at the horrors of the world and see how easily we can get rid of them once we make a peaceful revolution toward the new socialist logic. The Middle East war and Palestinian grievances? Of course, this is the result of capitalism, just let us make the revolution and the question is settled. Pollution? Of course, no problem at all, just let the new proletarian state take over the factories and no pollution any more. Traffic jams? This is because capitalists do not care a damn about human comfort, just give us power (in fact, this is a rather good point, in socialism we have far fewer cars and correspondingly fewer traffic jams). People die from hunger in India? Of course, American imperialists eat their food, but once we make the revolution, etc. Northern Ireland? Demographic problems in Mexico? Racial hatred? Tribal wars? Inflation? Criminality? Corruption? Degradation of educational systems? There is such a simple answer to everything and, moreover, the same answer to everything!

This is not a caricature, not in the slightest. This is a standard pattern of thought of those who have overcome the miserable illusions of reformism and invented the beneficial device for solving all problems of mankind, and this device consists in a few words which, when repeated

often enough, start looking as if they had a content: revolution, alternative society, etc. And we have in addition a number of negative words to provoke horror, for instance "anti-communism" or "liberal". You use these words as well, Edward, without explanation, aware though you must be that the purpose of these words is to mingle many different things and to produce vague negative associations. What is, in fact, the anti-communism you do not profess? Certainly, we know people who believe that there are no serious social problems in the Western world except for the communist danger, that all social conflicts here are to be explained by a communist plot, that the world would be a paradise if only sinister communist forces did not interfere, and that the most hideous military dictatorships deserve support if only they suppress communist movements. You are not anti-communist in that sense? Neither am I. But you will be called anti-communist if you do not strongly believe that the actual Soviet (resp. Chinese) system is the most perfect society the human mind has invented so far, or if you wrote a piece of purely scholarly work on the history of communism without lies. And there is a great number of other possibilities in between. The convenience of the word "anti-communism", the bogeyman of the leftist jargon, is precisely to put all of them in the same sack and never to explain the meaning of the word. The same with the word "liberal". Who is a "liberal"? Perhaps a 19th-century free-trader who proclaimed that the state should forbear from interfering in the "free contract" between workers and employers and that workers' unions were contrary to the free contract principle? Do you suggest that you are not "liberal" in this sense? This is very much to your credit. But according to the unwritten revolutionary OED you are "liberal" if you imagine in general that freedom is better than slavery (I do not mean the genuine, profound freedom people enjoy in socialist countries, but the miserable formal freedom invented by the bourgeoisie to deceive the toiling masses). And the word "liberal" has the easy task of amalgamating these and other things. And so, let us proclaim loudly that we spurn liberal illusions, but let us never explain what we exactly mean.

Should I go on with this progressive vocabulary? Just one more word which, I emphasize, you do not use in this sound sense, the word "fascist" or "fascism". This is an ingenious discovery, with a fair range of applications. Sometimes fascist is a person I disagree with but, because of my ignorance, I am unable to discuss with, so I will better kick him. When I collect my experiences, I notice that fascist is a person who holds one of the following beliefs (by way of example): 1) That people should wash themselves, rather than go dirty; 2) that freedom of the press in America is preferable to the ownership of the whole press by one ruling party; 3) that people should not be jailed

for their opinions. both communist and anti-communist; 4) that racial criteria, in favour of either whites or blacks, are inadvisable in admission to Universities; 5) that torture is condemnable, no matter who applies it. (Roughly speaking "fascist" was the same as "liberal".) Fascist was, by definition, a person who happened to have been in jail in a communist country. The refugees from Czechoslovakia in 1968 were sometimes met in Germany by very progressive and absolutely revolutionary leftists with placards saying "fascism will not pass".

And you blame me for making a caricature of the New Left. I wonder what such a caricature would be. Still, your irritation (this is one of the few points where your pen flares up) is understandable. You quote an interview I gave to the German Radio (and later translated from German into English and published in *Encounter*) where I said two or three general sentences expressing my disgust with New Leftist movements, as I knew them in America and Germany and—this is the point—I did not specify which movements I meant and I said instead vaguely "some people" etc. This means, I did not specifically exclude the *New Left Review* in 1960–3 when you were associated with it or even I tacitly included you in my statement. Here you got me. I did not specifically exclude the *New Left Review* in 1960–3 and, I admit, I did not even keep it in mind when I was talking to the German journalist. I thought that to say "some new leftists" etc. is rather like saying, e.g., "some British academics are drunkards". Do you think that many academics would be offended by such a (admittedly not very ingenious) statement, and if so, which ones? My comfort is that if I happen to say publicly such things on the New Left, my socialist friends somehow never feel that they could be included even if they are not specifically excluded.

But I cannot delay any longer. I hereby solemnly declare that in an interview to the German Radio in 1971, when I was talking about leftist obscurantism, I was not thinking of the *New Left Review* in 1960–63, with which Edward Thompson was involved. Will that be all right?

You are right, Edward, that we, people from Eastern Europe, have a tendency to underestimate the gravity of the social issues democratic societies face and we may be blamed for that. But we cannot be blamed for not taking seriously people who, unable though they are to remember correctly any single fact from our history or to say which barbaric dialect we speak, are perfectly able instead to teach us how liberated we are in the East and who have a rigorously scientific solution for humanity's illness and this solution consists in repeating a few phrases we could hear for thirty years on each celebration of the 1 May and read in any party propaganda brochure. (I am talking about the attitude of progressive radicals; the conservative attitude to the problems of the East is different and may be summarized briefly:

"This would be awful in our country, but for these tribes it is good enough.")

When I was leaving Poland at the end of 1968 (I had not been in any Western country for at least six previous years), I had a somewhat vague idea of what the radical student movement and different leftist groups or parties might be. What I saw and read I found pathetic and disgusting in nearly all (still: not all) cases. I do not shed tears for a few windows smashed in demonstrations, that old bitch, consumer capitalism, will survive it. Neither do I find scandalous the rather natural ignorance of young people. What impressed me was mental degradation of a kind I had never seen before in any leftist movement. I saw young people trying to "reconstitute" universities and to liberate them from horrifying, savage, monstrous, fascist oppression. The list of demands, with variations, was very similar all over the world of campuses. These fascist pigs of the Establishment want us to pass examinations while we are making the revolution; let them give all of us A grades without examinations; curiously enough, the anti-fascist warriors wanted to get their degrees and diplomas in such fields as mathematics, sociology or law, and not in such as carrying posters, distributing leaflets or destroying offices. And sometimes they got what they wanted, the fascist pigs of the establishment gave them grades without examinations. Very often there were demands for abolishing altogether some subjects of teaching as irrelevant, e.g. foreign languages (these fascists want us, internationalist revolutionaries, to waste time in learning languages, why? To prevent us from making world revolution!) In one place revolutionary philosophers went on strike because they got a reading list including Plato, Descartes and other bourgeois idiots, instead of relevant great philosophers like Che Guevara and Mao. In another, revolutionary mathematicians pass a motion that the department should organize courses on the social tasks of mathematics and (this is the point) each student should be able to attend this course as many times as he wanted and each time get credit for it, which meant that he could get the diploma in mathematics exactly for nothing. In still another place, the noble martyrs of the world revolution demanded to be examined only by other students they would choose themselves, and not by these old reactionary pseudo-scholars. Professors should be appointed (by students, of course) according to their political views, students admitted on the same grounds. In several cases in the US, the vanguard of the oppressed toiling masses set fire to University libraries (irrelevant pseudo-knowledge of the Establishment). Needless to say, you could hear that there is no difference, no difference at all, between the life in a California campus and a Nazi concentration camp. And all were Marxists, of course, which meant they knew three or four sentences written by Marx or Lenin, in particular the sentence "the

philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (what Marx wanted to say in this sentence, it is obvious to them, was that it made no sense to learn).

I could carry on this list for pages but this may suffice, the patterns are always the same: the great socialist revolution consists, first of all, in giving us privileges, titles and power for our political opinions and in destroying the old reactionary academic values like knowledge and logical abilities (but these fascist pigs should give us money, money, money).

And what about the workers? There are two rival views. One (pseudo-Marcusian) says that these bastards were bribed by the bourgeoisie and one cannot expect anything more from them, now the students are the most oppressed and the most revolutionary class of society. Another (Leninist) says that workers have a false consciousness and do not understand their alienation, because the capitalists give them wrong papers to read, but we, revolutionaries, store in our heads the correct consciousness of the proletariat, we know what the workers should think and, in fact, do think without knowing it; consequently we deserve to take power (but not in this stupid electoral play which, as has been scientifically proved, is just for deceiving the people).

You say complacently "revolutionary farce". All right, it is. But to say this is not enough. This is not a farce capable of turning upside down the society but it is capable of destroying the university and this is a performance worth worrying about (some German universities look already rather like party schools).

And let us go back to the more general question we discussed earlier in private letters. You defend the movement I just described by saying "but there was a Vietnam war". Very much so, indeed, to put it elegantly. And many other things, no doubt. Traditional German universities had some intolerable features. Italian and French universities had others of their own. There are many things in any society and in any university to justify protest. And—this is my point—you will find no political movement in the world which has no good and well justified claims. If you look at mutual accusations of parties vying for power you always find some well chosen and well grounded points in their claims and attacks, and you do not take it as a reason to support all of them. Nobody is altogether wrong and you are right, of course, in saying that those who joined the communist parties were not altogether wrong. When you look at Nazi propaganda against the Weimar republic, you will find a great number of well justified points: they said that the Versailles Treaty was a shame, and it was; that the democracy was corrupted, and it was; they attacked aristocracy, plutocracy, the power of bankers and, incidentally, the pseudo-freedom, irrelevant to the real needs of the people and serving dirty Jewish newspapers. And

this was not a good reason to say "all right, they do not behave very decently and some points in their ideas are rather silly, but they are not wrong in many questions, so let us give them a qualified support". At least, many people refused to say so. And in fact, had the Nazis not had many good points in attacking the existing regime, they would not have won, there would not have been such a phenomenon as the ranks of *Rotfront* passing with unfolded colours over to the SA. This is the reason why, when I saw movements imitating the same patterns of behaviour and imitating a part of the same ideology (viz. in all points concerning "formal" freedom and all democratic institutions, tolerance and academic values) I could not be strongly impressed by the saying: "but there was a Vietnam war".

You say that we should help the blind to recover their sight. I accept this advice with a slight restriction: it is difficult to apply when you have to do with people who are omniscient and all-seeing anyway. I do not remember having ever refused a discussion with people who were ready to have it, the trouble is that some were not, and this precisely because of their omniscience, which I lacked. True, I was almost omniscient (yet not entirely) when I was 20 years old but, as you know, people grow stupid when they grow older, and so, I was much less omniscient when I was 28 and still less now. Nor am I capable of satisfying those who look for perfect certainty and for immediate global solutions to all the world's calamities and misery. Still, I believe that in approaching other people we should, as far as we are able to do so, follow the Jesuit, rather than the Calvinist, method; this means, we ought to presuppose that nobody is totally and hopelessly corrupted, that everybody, no matter how perverted and limited, has some good points and some good intentions we can catch hold of. This is admittedly easier to say than to practise and I do not think that either of us is a perfect master in this maieutic art.



Your proposal to define yourself (and myself) by the allegiance to the "Marxist tradition" (as opposed to the system, the method, the heritage) seems to me elusive and vague. I am not sure of the meaning you confer on this attachment unless you simply find it important to be called "Marxist"; but you say you do not. Neither do I. I am not interested at all in being "a Marxist" or in being called so. There are certainly only few people working in the human sciences who would not acknowledge their debt to Marx and I am not one of them. I readily admit that without Marx our thinking about history would be different and in many respects worse than it is. To say this is rather trivial. Still, I think that many important tenets of **Marx's** doctrine are either false or meaningless or else true only in a very restricted sense. I think

that the labour theory of value is a normative device without any explanatory power whatsoever; that none of the well known general formulae of the historical materialism to be found in **Marx's** writings is admissible and that this doctrine is valid **only** in a strongly qualified sense; that his theory of class consciousness is false and that most of his predictions proved to be erroneous (this is admittedly a general description of what I feel, I am not trying to justify here my conclusions). If I admit nevertheless to keep thinking, in historical (yet not in philosophical) matters, in terms inherited in part from the **Marxian** legacy, do I accept an allegiance to the Marxist tradition? Only in such a loose sense that the same statement would be equally true when I substitute for "**Marxist**"—"Christian", "sceptical", "empiricist". Without belonging to any political party or sect, to any Church, to any philosophical school, I do not deny my debt to Marxism, to Christianity, to sceptical philosophy, to empiricist thought and to a few other traditions (more specifically Eastern and less interesting to you) I have in my background. Neither do I share the horror of "eclecticism" if the opposite of eclecticism is philosophical or political bigotry (as it usually is in the minds of those who terrify us with the label of eclecticism). In such a poor sense, I admit to belong to the Marxist tradition, among others. But you seem to imply more. You seem to imply the existence of a "**Marxist family**" defined by the spiritual descendance from **Marx** and to invite me to join it. Do you mean that all people who in one way or another call themselves Marxists form a family (never mind that they have been killing each other for half a century and still do) opposed as such to the rest of the world? And that this family is for you (and ought to be for me) a place of identification? If this is what you mean, I cannot even say that I refuse to join this family; it simply does not exist in a world where the great Apocalypse can most **likely** be triggered off by the war between two empires both claiming to be perfect embodiments of Marxism.



There are in your letter several points which I should broach not because of their importance but because of the unpleasantly demagogic way you discuss them. I will take up two of them. You quote an article of mine containing a remark which I thought was rather a trivial platitude: that exploited classes have not been allowed to participate in the development of spiritual culture. And then you appear as a spokesman of the insulted working class and you explain to me, with indignation, that the working class developed a sense of solidarity, loyalty etc. In other words: I said this rather to deplore than to exalt the fact that the exploited were denied access to **education**—and you show disgust at the fact that, in my view, the working class has

no moral! This is not a misreading but a sort of absurd "Hineinlesen" which makes any discussion impossible. And then, when I stigmatized as obscurantist the idea of a new, socialist logic or science (again, a truism, as I saw it), you explain that the point is not to change logic but that Marx did want to change the property relations. Did he, really? Well, what can I say except that you opened my eyes? And if you think that the question of a "new logic" or "new science" as opposed to "bourgeois logic" and "bourgeois science" was not at issue, you are entirely wrong. This was not an extravagance but a current pattern of thinking and talking among the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinists and these patterns were inherited intact by dozens of Lenins, Trotskys and Robespierres you could find in any American or German campus.

The second point is your comment on one sentence I uttered in the same interview you quoted; it said that "men have no fuller means of self-identification than through religious symbols" and that "religious consciousness . . . is an irreplaceable part of human culture". Here, you explode. "By what right (you say), what study of its tradition and sensibility, may you assume this as a universal in the heart of an ancient Protestant Island, doggedly resistant to the magic of religious symbolism. . . ." I am sorry for many reasons. First, that I gave my interview to the German journalist in the heart of the ancient Protestant Island instead of doing this on German soil. Second, that I failed to explain—which I assumed, wrongly, to be known—that "religious symbol" is not necessarily, contrary to what you obviously believe, a picture, a sculpture, a rosary etc., but everything people believe gives them a way of communicating with the Supernatural or conveys its energy (Jesus Christ himself is a symbol, not only a crucifix). I did not invent this use of the word, but, since I did not explain it in my interview, I offended your iconoclastic English tradition. Does this lexical explanation appease somewhat your Protestant conscience hurt by a superstitious Ultramontanist? And you accuse me—that beats everything—of not proving, in this interview, my belief in the permanence of the religious phenomenon. I was really reckless in not quoting entirely, in this interview, all the books and articles I have written on the subject to support this view. You had no reason whatsoever to read these books (one of them, over eight hundred dense pages, and dealing mostly with sectarian movements of the 17th century, is so boring that it would be rather inhuman to ask you to wade through it)—at least you had no such reason as long as you were not trying to criticize my views on the subject. Therefore your indignant "By what right . . ." seems to be more appropriate when retorted to you.

Unfortunately, your article teems with such cases when you shift the subject and you try to make yourself believe that I said something you think I should have said on the basis of some general beliefs you

attribute to me. I am sure you do this unconsciously, according to a peculiar logic of beliefs which has always been very characteristic of dogmatic communist thinking, where the difference between those reasonings which are truth-functional and those which are not entirely disappeared; however even if it were true that A entails B, it would not follow that if someone believes A, he believes B. (The wilful rejection of this rather unsophisticated distinction has always allowed the communist press to give its readers information constructed approximately in this way: "The American President said that, in defiance of the protest of the whole peace-loving mankind, he would carry on with the genocidal war in Vietnam" or "Chinese leaders declare that their jingoist, anti-leninist policy aims at the destruction of the socialist camp in order to help imperialists".) There is a consistence in this grotesque Wonderland logic and I rather dislike your reasonings echoing it. But there is more than that. Since you think about society in categories of global "systems"—capitalism or socialism—you believe that: 1) socialism, imperfect though it is, is essentially a higher stage of mankind's development and this superiority of the "system" is valid irrespectively of whether or not it can be shown in any particular facts related to human life; 2) all negative facts to be found in the non-socialist world—apartheid in South Africa, torture in Brazil, hunger in Nigeria or inadequate health service in Britain—are to be imputed to the "system", while similar facts occurring within the socialist world have to be accounted for by the "system" as well, yet not socialist, but the same capitalist system (survival of old society; impact of encirclement etc.); 3) whoever does not believe in the superiority of the socialist "system" so conceived is bound to believe that "capitalism" is in principle admirable and to justify or to conceal its monstrosities, i.e. to justify apartheid in South Africa, hunger in Nigeria etc. Hence your desperate attempts to force me to have said something I have not. (True, since you consider my case not entirely lost, you try to wake up my conscience and you explain, e.g., that there are spies and bugging devices in Western countries. Really? Are you not joking?) Needless to say, this peculiar way of reasoning is absolutely irrefutable, because it is able to neglect all empirical facts as irrelevant (whatever bad happens within the "capitalist system" is by definition the product of capitalism; whatever bad happens in "the socialist system" is by the same definition the product of the same capitalism). And socialism is defined within this "system-thinking" as total or nearly total state ownership of the means of production; you obviously cannot define socialism in terms of the abolition of hired labour, since you know that if empirical socialism differs in this respect from capitalism, this is only in restoring direct slave labour for prisoners, half-slave labour for workers (abolition of the freedom to change one's place of work) and

the mediaeval *glebae adscriptio* for peasants. So, within this construction it is consistent to believe that with the private title of ownership the roots of evil, if not all actual evil, on earth are eradicated. But these three statements I mentioned are nothing else but the expression of an ideological commitment, incapable of being either validated or disproved empirically. You say that to think in terms of "system" yields excellent results. I am quite sure it does, not only excellent, but miraculous; it simply solves all problems of **mankind** at one stroke. This is why people who have not reached this level of scientific consciousness (like myself) do not know such a simple device for the salvation of the world, as is known to any sophomore in Berlin or Nebraska, viz. the socialist world revolution.

* * *

I have obviously not exhausted the topics of your text, which restores the dignity of the vanishing art of epistolography. But I believe I have touched on the most controversial ones. The gulf dividing us is at the moment unlikely to be bridged. You still seem to consider yourself as a dissident communist or as a sort of revisionist. I do not, and this for a very long time. You seem to define your position in terms of discussions of 1956 and I do not. This was an important year and its illusions were important, too. But they were crushed just after they had appeared. You probably realize that what was labelled "**revisionism**" in the people's democracies is virtually dead (possibly with the exception of Yugoslavia) which means that both young and old people in these countries stopped **thinking** about their situation in terms of "genuine socialism", "genuine Marxism" etc. They want (more often than not in a passive way) more national independence, more political and social freedom, better life conditions — but not because there is anything specifically socialist in these claims. The official state ideology is in a paradoxical position. It is absolutely indispensable, for it is the only way in which the ruling apparatus can legitimize its power; and it is believed by nobody — either the rulers or the ruled (both well aware of the unbelief of the others and of their own). And in Western countries, virtually every intellectual who considers himself socialist (and even communist) will admit in private talk that the socialist idea is in a deep crisis; few will admit **this** in print, here buoyant jauntiness is obligatory and we must not sow **doubts** and confusion "in the masses" or supply our foes with arguments. I am not sure if you agree that this is a self-defeating policy, I rather think you do not.

~~In the~~ meantime some traditionally socialist institutions seem to creep in capitalist societies in a rather unexpected way. Even the most short-sighted politicians realize now that not everything can be bought for money, that a moment might come when no money will buy us

clean air, clean water, more land or wasted natural resources. And so, "use value" comes back, slowly, into the economy. A paradoxical "socialism" resulting from the fact that mankind does not know what to do with garbage. The result is growing bureaucracy and the growing role of power centres. The only medicine communism has invented—the centralized, beyond social control, state ownership of the national wealth and one-party rule—is worse than the illness it is supposed to cure; it is less efficient economically and it makes the bureaucratic character of social relations an absolute principle. I appreciate your ideal of the decentralized society with a large autonomy for small communities and I share your attachment to this tradition. But it is silly to deny powerful forces resulting from the technological development itself, and not from the fact of private property, and leading toward greater and greater power of the central bureaucracy. If you pretend to know simple means to cope with this situation, if you imagine to have found the solution in saying "we will make a peaceful revolution and socialism will reverse this trend" you delude yourself and you fall victim to verbal magic. The more society depends on the complex technological network it created, the more problems have to be regulated by central powers, the more powerful state bureaucracy is, the more political democracy and more "formal", "bourgeois" freedom is needed to tame the ruling apparatus and to secure individuals their shrinking rights to remain individuals. There will never be and there cannot be any economical or industrial democracy without political ("bourgeois") democracy with everything it entails. We do not know how to harmonize the contradictory tasks contemporary society imposes upon us, we can only try an uncertain balance between these tasks, we have no prescription for a conflictless and secure society. I will repeat what I wrote once elsewhere: "In private life there is the attitude of those who think about how they could gain at one blow the capital that would allow them to spend the rest of their life without worries, in peace and security; and there is the attitude of those who must worry about how to survive until tomorrow. I think that human society as a whole will never be in the happy position of a rentier, living on dividends and having the guarantee of the secure life to the end, thanks to the capital once acquired. Its position will be rather similar to that of a journeyman who must care about how to survive until tomorrow. The utopians are people who dream about ensuring for mankind the position of rentier and who are convinced that this position is so splendid that no sacrifices (in particular no moral sacrifices) are too great to achieve it."

This does not mean that socialism is a dead option. I do not think so. But I do think that this option was emptied not only by the experience of socialist states; it was emptied by the silly self-complacency and

self-confidence of its adherents, by their inability to face both the limits of our efforts to change society and the incompatibility of demands and values which made up their creed; briefly, that the meaning of this option has to be revised entirely, from the very roots.

And when I say "socialism" I do not mean a state of perfection but rather a movement trying to satisfy demands for equality, freedom and efficiency, a movement that is worth trouble only as far as it is aware not only of the complexity of problems hidden in each of these values separately but also of the fact that they limit each other and can be implemented only through compromises. We make fools of ourselves and of others if we think (or pretend to think) otherwise. All institutional changes have to be treated entirely as means at the service of these values and not as ends in themselves and be judged correspondingly, taking into account the price we pay in one value when we reinforce another one. Attempts to consider any of these three values as absolute and to implement it at all costs not only are bound to destroy two others but they are self-defeating—a discovery of venerable antiquity. Absolute equality can be set up only within a despotic system of rule which implies privileges, i.e. destroys equality; total freedom means anarchy and anarchy results in the domination of the physically strongest, i.e. total freedom turns into its opposite; efficiency as a supreme value calls again for despotism and despotism is economically inefficient above a certain level of technology. If I repeat these old truisms this is because they still seem to go unnoticed in utopian thinking; and this is why nothing in the world is easier than writing utopias. I wish we could agree on this point. If we do, we can agree on many others, even after exchanging a few caustic remarks which, I hope, we will be generous enough to forgive each other. Such an agreement will be much less likely if you keep believing that communism was in principle an excellent contrivance, somewhat spoiled in less than excellent application. I hope to have explained to you why, for many years, I have not expected anything from attempts to mend, to renovate, to clean or to correct the communist idea. Alas, poor idea. I knew it, Edward. This skull will never smile again.

Yours in friendship,
Leszek Kolakowski