

# THE MAKING OF THE FIRST NEW LEFT IN BRITAIN

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## Introduction

In 1956 a cadre of Marxist historians in Britain created what would come to be known as the New Left. The New Left in Britain took the form of a loose affiliation of scholars and intellectuals whose goal it was to create a space for socialist change within and between the existing structures in the British labor movement. This third way between the established Labour Party and Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) developed into a “movement of ideas” articulated through its publications and the development of grassroots-level clubs and activism.<sup>1</sup> It is through the journals *New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review (ULR)*, as the main voices of the movement, that the New Left must be understood. Eventually these journals combined into the *New Left Review*. Shortly thereafter, the New Left split, and the original group of intellectuals became known as the First New Left. These intellectuals greatly influenced socialist thought in the aftermath of Stalinsim and paved a way forward for future socialist activism. Existing works on the group analyze its impact and assess its successes and failures. By placing an emphasis on understanding the conditions that existed during the making of the First New Left, the following historical analysis argues that these assessments within the historiography require revision.

### **Origin and Adoption of the Term New Left**

The term “New Left” first appeared in the journals of the British New Left in the first issue of *Universities & Left Review* in 1957. French contributor, Claude

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<sup>1</sup> Hall, Stuart. "Life and Times of the First New Left." *New Left Review* 61 (2010): 177-96.

Bourdet's article, "The French Left: Long-run Trends", contained the first use of the term as a reference to third-way socialist movement that sought to occupy the space between Communism and social democracy.<sup>2</sup> Bourdet and the French movement centered around the publication of his journal, *France-Observateur*, which Hall and his co-founders of the *ULR* were familiar with.<sup>3</sup> The term then adopted by the intellectuals of the First New Left in Britain and other "New Lefts" in Europe and the Americas.<sup>4</sup> The journals first used the term as a reference to themselves in the autumn of 1958. The *New Reasoner* dedicated a letter to its readers addressing the development of a New Left in Britain.<sup>5</sup> *ULR* contributor, Ralph Samuel, spoke of the New Left as an influence on Labour policy and the expansion of the welfare state in a book review in the same quarter.<sup>6</sup> In adopting the title of New Left, the group attempted to create a third way forward for socialist ideals in Britain. The designation of "First New Left", as it relates to the British New Left, specifically refers to the initial group of scholars who founded the original journals in 1956-57 and eventually merged the journals into the *New Left Review (NLR)* in 1960.

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<sup>2</sup> Claude Bourdet, "French Left," *Universities & Left Review* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1957): 13-16.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, "Life and Times of the First New Left," 177.

<sup>5</sup> John Saville and E.P. Thompson, "Letter to Our Readers," *New Reasoner* no. 6 (Autumn 1958): 137-40.

<sup>6</sup> Raphael Samuel, "New Authoritarianism - New Left," *Universities & Left Review* no. 5 (Autumn 1958): 67-69.

## **Importance of the First New Left**

The First New Left in Britain was a response to the bipolarity of the Cold War. Stuart Hall argued in 2010 that the First New Left not only sought to create a space for political movement between the Stalinists and the social democrats, but also between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.<sup>7</sup> As a response to Stalinism and the difficulties in promoting socialism in the affluence of 1950s Cold War Britain, the New Left has been an interesting study for both historians and political scientists. The importance of the New Left lies in its impact on the development of a post-Stalinist Marxist philosophy, its political activism, and the individual contributions of New Left intellectuals on their respective fields of study.

The New Left helped to create an intellectual space for debate, removed from Stalinist dogmatism. This allowed ideas connecting politics, culture, and everyday life to converge into the same running dialogue that placed individuals and not structures in the forefront of discussion. The New Left's own political and social activism began to incorporate the ideas that its journals espoused. Eventually, these ideas influenced the development of political and social movements that sought to operate "from below". Examples include, but are not limited to, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the peace movements of the 1960s, and the feminist movement.<sup>8</sup> More recent movements of the Left champion the New Left's ideas of a popular socialist movement, which promoted democratic and not statist ideals for socialism, as the way forward in the face of the neo-liberalism that emerged among

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<sup>7</sup> Hall, "Life and Times of the First New Left," 195.

<sup>8</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement and Organizing for Socialism", in *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, ed. Lynne Segal et al. (London: Merlin Press, 1979), 140.

the Right.<sup>9</sup> That the New Left's prescription for grass-roots socialism remain provides an example of the group's importance.

The many works on Labour politics during the Cold War era that mention the New Left speaks to its impact in Britain's labor movement politics as well.<sup>10</sup> An example of the New Left's influence on the Labour Party was its activism and involvement with the CND. The First New Left promoted and participated in the Aldermaston marches against nuclear proliferation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These drew crowds of up to one hundred thousand protesters, and eventually caused the Labour Party to adopt a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament in the Party's 1960 platform.<sup>11</sup>

The First New Left's importance also lies in the impact of its contributors. Intellectuals like E.P. Thompson, John Saville, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and several others remain influential in their respective fields for the unique and invaluable perspectives their works offer. Understanding this history of the New Left contextualizes the scholarly works by the members of the group. These works continue to impact the disciplines of history, political science, economics, and cultural studies. Comprehending how the political thought of the group developed allows for a deeper analysis of the works of Thompson, Hall, Williams, and others.

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<sup>9</sup> Hilary Wainwright, *Arguments for a New Left: Answering the Free-Market Right* (Cambridge, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1994), 16.

<sup>10</sup> A.J. Davies, *To Build a New Jerusalem: the British Labour Party from Keir Hardie to Tony Blair*, rev. ed. (London: Abacus, 1996); Kevin Jeffrys, *The Labour Party Since 1945* (London: MacMillan, 1993); David Howell, *British Social Democracy: a Study in Development and Decay*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Harry Harmer, *The Longman Companion to the Labour Party, 1900-1998* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1999), 162-63.

The New Left remains a topic for scholars of history and politics because of its lasting importance. Most of the works dedicated to studying the New Left come from political scientists. They are valuable in their analyses of the New Left's political philosophy and its relationship with Labour Party politics, but they often lack historical perspective, causing scholars to draw a variety of conclusions. Michael Kenny summarized some of these conflicting views of the New Left in the introduction to his book, *The First New Left*.<sup>12</sup> These assessments of the New Left detailed by Kenny ranged from plaudits of their impact on socialist thought to the dismissal of the group as a marginal intellectual current that rendered no tangible effects on the labor movement.<sup>13</sup>

The successes and failures of the movement, and even whether the New Left could be characterized as a movement at all, have all been topics wrestled with by scholars interested in the group. Assessments of the New Left have often focused largely on its failure to achieve a connection between the intellectuals of the movement and the working peoples of Britain in any measurable form. Unfortunately, many works within the historiography provide little context for this perceived failure and prescribe, through the benefit hindsight, the solutions to the mistakes of the New Left. It is on these discussions of success and failure that this thesis focuses. If the New Left is to be judged by the perception that it has either failed or succeeded, it must first be understood within the context in which it came about. This approach is useful in that it provides the context that informs, and

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Kenny, *The First New Left*, 2.



perhaps eliminates, several of the prevailing assumptions about this faction of socialist intellectuals.

To examine either the success or failure of the New Left, there are several things that must be kept in mind. First, the New Left was not a political party. It did not provide an electoral platform nor seek to operate in the same manner as Labour or the CPGB. What the New Left sought to do was create a space for debate among socialists, to return to pre-Stalinist notions of socialism and communism, and to reconnect the socialist intellectual with the working people of Britain's labor movement.<sup>14</sup>

The New Left intentionally created a movement that lacked the rigidity of a political party. Having dealt with the bureaucratic machinery of the CPGB, the New Left's founders preferred the movement to remain largely unstructured. John Saville referred to this lack of structure as a "mood", which is the term used throughout this thesis.<sup>15</sup> By "mood" Saville implied that the New Left hoped to remain an ideological movement that could take whatever shape necessary. The conditions existing in London differed from those in Leeds, or Glasgow. If the New Left could remain unencumbered by a party structure, the New Left could meet the diverse needs of those who adopted its notion of socialism. The existing historiography often fails to consider this intentional fragmentation.

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<sup>14</sup> John Saville and E.P. Thompson, "Editorial," *New Reasoner* 1 (Summer 1957): 1.

<sup>15</sup> John Saville and E.P. Thompson, "Letter to Our Readers," *New Reasoner* 6 (Autumn 1958): 137-40.

## Historiography

Previous work on the New Left has tended to view the group's failures as the product of poor political planning. The authors of these works were overwhelmingly from the field of political science and failed to analyze the historical context within which the New Left came about, existed, and fell apart. What I intend to argue throughout the next four chapters is that the New Left's failure in reconnecting intellectuals and the workers can largely be attributed to the inability the movement to cope with the aftermath of Stalinism and successfully navigate the inhospitable climate of Britain's Cold War labor movement.

The existing works on the New Left fall into two major categories, biographies of group members and surveys of the New Left in general. Since the New Left contained many important intellectuals, a fair amount of information about the group appears in biographies. Biographies of EP Thompson are numerous but very similar.<sup>16</sup> Each tends to spend more time with the evolution of Thompson's notion of socialist humanism and the debates he conducted with members of the more theoretical second New Left than on the development and inner workings of what became the First New Left. In general, the Thompson biographies do little to further an understanding of the New Left as a whole. Slightly more enlightening is a biography on New Left contributor Ralph Miliband by Michael Newman.<sup>17</sup> Newman spends some time addressing the New Left and Miliband's role in shaping it. Miliband's involvement with both the *New Reasoner*

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<sup>16</sup> Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Pr, 1981); Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso Books, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Newman, *Ralph Miliband and The Politics of the New Left* (London, Merlin: 2002).

and *ULR*, as well as their successor the *New Left Review*, made his story one of significance within the movement as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

A few of the biographies of New Left contributors were written in the form of memoirs.<sup>19</sup> John Saville provided one such autobiographical account.<sup>20</sup> While useful in gauging personal feelings about the movement, one must be careful to realize that Saville wrote his memoirs decades after these events unfolded. Undoubtedly his subsequent experiences and the ebbs and flows of personal relationships affected his view on the birth of the New Left, the personalities involved, and the group's accomplishments. In spite of this, the memoir still proves valuable. Firstly, it quotes sources unavailable outside of Britain.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the memoir serves to reaffirm notions about the New Left's preoccupations and its nature that became apparent through reading the articles of the *New Reasoner* and *ULR*.

Like the biographies, the survey material on the New Left comes from professors of Political Science. Two major analyses of the New Left first appeared in the mid-1990s. The first was Lin Chun's 1993 work, *The British New Left*. Spun from her dissertation, the monograph follows the political thought of key New Left contributors Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Perry Anderson. Lin's work covers both the first and second New Lefts in Britain and spends little time on historical context of the movement.

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<sup>18</sup> Newman's biography of Miliband lays out the latter's contribution to all three journals as well as his interactions with his friends and key New Left figures.

<sup>19</sup> Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: an Autobiography of the Sixties* (London: Verso, 2005); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: New Press, 2005); Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> For example, the memoir included personal correspondences between Saville and Thompson during the formation of *Reasoner* and *New Reasoner*.

The second major survey of the New Left came from Sheffield Professor in Politics, Michael Kenny.<sup>22</sup> Both Kenny's and Lin's work share many similarities, though Kenny completely devotes his to the first New Left. Among other topics, he dedicates entire chapters to Thompson's socialist humanism, the *ULR*'s notions of politics and culture, and the adoption of "positive neutralism" as the group's Cold War outlook. Kenny spends much of his work analyzing the group's political theories without much attention to historical context.

While these works are valuable in understanding the New Left's ideas and politics, the historical approach can enrich our understanding of the group by placing it within an historical context. Existing scholarship fails to address the motives of the New Left and how this affected both its structure and activities. For example, writing about the New Left occasionally criticizes the group's lack of structure as one of its many faults and a factor in its overall failure to initiate socialist change. While this is certainly true, works on the New Left largely ignore why this lack of structure existed to begin with. I argue that the decentralized nature of the New Left was not as much a product of poor leadership as it was a response to the experiences of the group's intellectuals and students during a time of crisis for the Left in Britain. In addition to addressing the New Left's structural characteristics, the following work addresses how the intellectuals of the New Left sought to return to a native socialist tradition in Britain, how they navigated a complex relationship with the Labour Party, and how the intellectual nature of the movement proved a hurdle.

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<sup>22</sup> Kenny, *First New Left*.

## Chapter Outline

Since this thesis will focus on the forces at play in shaping the first phase of the British New Left once it came into existence, it remains necessary to discuss the most powerful force in creating the New Left. Also, as is implied by the descriptor “first”, there eventually came to be a Second New Left in Britain. Following the introduction, chapter one focuses on providing readers with a clear understanding of the birth of the First New Left and the eventual succession by the Second.

The New Left’s inception resulted directly from the events of 1956. That tumultuous year saw multiple crises within international communism. These crises resulted in consequences as minute as shifts in personal political affiliation and as grand as a reassessment of socialist theory and practice. Caught up in this turbulence were the intellectuals of the first New Left. The journals that they formed in the wake of 1956 eventually merged into the *New Left Review* at the outset of the 1960s, signaling the beginning of the end for the first wave of the New Left in Britain.

The second chapter addresses the New Left on its own terms. In contrast to existing analyses of the New Left, it does not examine the group’s political or theoretical successes and failures from the perspective of hindsight. Rather, it attempts to understand the New Left as it developed within the context of Cold War Britain by analyzing the group’s writings in its two main publications, *New Reasoner* and *ULR*. Two things emerge from the pages. First, the New Left was indeed an attempt to return to socialist traditions in Britain, as they imagined it. The lingering specter of Stalinism over any hope for a socialist foothold in Britain provided the

impetus for the New Left to pursue such a return. Combating Stalinism through the restoration of a more humanistic socialism garnered much space and debate within the New Left publications, and deserves to be understood as a key component of how the New Left viewed itself.

The second chapter also focuses on the idea that the New Left was not so much a structured movement as a “mood”. Analyses of the New Left often scapegoat its lack of structure as the reason for the group’s perceived failures. However, the New Left’s lack of organizational rigidity gave its grassroots contributors the ability to determine its course. The non-structured nature of the New Left was a conscious response to the environment it grew out of. The rigidity of the bureaucratic CPGB, as well as the Labour Party, precipitated the initial dissenting opinions that united the intellectuals of the New Left.

The third chapter deals with the circumstances the New Left faced in creating a new path for socialism in Britain. It focuses not on the New Left’s perceived failures, but on how it navigated its historical context. The chapter shows that intellectuals in Britain faced an uphill battle on a variety of fronts when attempting to influence the labor movement. The affluence of the 1950s and the anti-intellectualism of the labor movement provided two stumbling blocks and the New Left intellectuals’ provided the third. Contributors to the New Left participated in workers’ education movements and helped to foster the growth of clubs around Britain, but the content of the journals continued to be very theoretical and lack the practical application required to engage working people. It seems the New Left remained clueless about how to involve the working class in its efforts.

The fourth chapter takes a step back from debates on the group's effectiveness in engaging working people and looks at the First New Left in Britain by the numbers. In compiling lists of who contributed to the journals and how often they did so, we can elicit patterns and note the homogeneity of the movement. We begin to see that evidence of a narrow intellectual movement, and the influence of a few individuals on the material published by the group. By quantifying the make-up of the New Left, scholars are better equipped to evaluate the influence of certain scholars and the impact of the intellectual nature of the movement. The chapter also serves to answer historiographical questions about the divide between first and second New Left. By looking at the contributors to the original journals and comparing them to those of the combined *New Left Review*, we see that the movement that sprouted in 1956, and its message of a return to earlier socialist traditions, ceased to exist and was replaced by a second New Left.

All four chapters reveal that current assessments of the first New Left in Britain fail to consider basic historical questions about the actions of individuals in response to the circumstances in which they exist. If the New Left is to be understood at all, it must be understood as a loosely affiliated "mood" for socialist change among intellectuals in Britain. The group's failure to engage working people into a full-fledged movement was a consequence of the New Left's obsession with the stain left by Stalinism, the conditions of the labor movement of Cold War Britain, and the impact of the New Left's position as an overwhelmingly intellectual movement.

## Chapter 1

“We have to recognize that the rebuilding of a socialist movement will be an uneven and bitty historical process; and there are no Sacred Cows which have first to be bowed to.”<sup>23</sup> With this quote from 1959, John Saville, and the founders of the New Left movement that he represented, asserted that a successful socialist movement in Cold War Britain would first have to recognize its place in relation to the other groups situated on the left of British politics. In particular, any new socialist movement would have to find a way to create a space for itself between the two most powerful groups in this environment, the Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). It was these parties that Saville dubbed “Sacred Cows”, emphasizing the point that too many among the left in Britain were unwilling to tread uncomfortably between his New Left and the establishment parties in British politics.

That such a statement or debate occurred, pointed to the fact that some among the loosely affiliated group of scholars and intellectuals comprising Britain’s first New Left were beginning to concern themselves with theorizing a new way forward for socialism in Britain. While this was the case by 1959, historians Saville and his editorial partner E.P. Thompson had not aspired to create such a movement when they began publishing a journal of dissent in 1956.

This chapter uses the journals and memoirs of the New Left’s own contributors alongside secondary works by later scholars to survey the history of the New Left. Subsequent chapters build off of this historical foundation to elicit

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<sup>23</sup> John Saville, “A Note on West Fife,” *New Reasoner* no. 10 (1959): 12.



deeper understandings of the impact of the New Left. What follows is an account of the creation and decline of the First New Left in Britain.

### **The Creation of the First New Left**

The CPGB, like other national communist parties, bowed to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the doctrine of Stalinism. As early as the 1930s, some members of the CPGB recognized the fallacy in any longer regarding the party as anything but Stalinist. In a 2006 article, John McIlroy detailed this early Stalinization of the CPGB and the growing dissent within the party by recounting the claims of former Party members who found the acceptance of Stalinism and the stifling of discussion within the CPGB to be against Marxist tradition. McIlroy's article asserted that under the leadership of Harry Pollitt (appointed with the personal approval of Stalin) the "cult of Stalin burgeoned in the British as in the Russian party", which led several intellectuals within the CPGB to denounce their membership.<sup>24</sup> Among the intellectuals who rejected this early slide toward Stalinism were Frank and Winifred Horrabin, Francis Meynell, J. Walton Newbold, Raymond Postgate, and Ellen Wilkinson; all of whom were influential in the development of the party in the previous decade.<sup>25</sup> Over the next two decades, Pollitt and his fellow Party leaders drew the CPGB closer to the CPSU. All the while, dissent within the Party went unheard, creating a tense atmosphere between the leadership and those who saw a need to distance the CPGB from Stalinism. By the

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<sup>24</sup> John McIlroy, "The Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy and the Stalinization of British Communism 1928-1933," *Past and Present* no. 192 (2006): 189.

<sup>25</sup> McIlroy, "The Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy and the Stalinization of British Communism 1928-1933," 189.

mid-1950s, these tensions would drive a wedge between the intellectual fringe of the CPGB and the Party leadership. The nature of Stalin's reign and the deaths of millions became common knowledge by the mid-1950s. These revelations led E.P. Thompson, John Saville, and other Marxist intellectuals to defect from the CPGB as academics in the 1930s had done before them. The catalysts for the defection and the initiating forces behind what would become the New Left were Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" to the Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Union and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The CPGB's response to each event emboldened the dissenting, intellectual wing of the CPGB.

### **The Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Union**

In February of 1956 Nikita Khrushchev delivered a four-hour speech to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow. The speech outlined the dangers of the "cult of the individual" that surrounded the late Joseph Stalin, and detailed some of the horrors of his reign. Despite the fact that Khrushchev's speech came during a closed-door session of the CPSU, the content of his revelations quickly made their way west and were published by June of 1956 in the *Observer*.<sup>26</sup>

The CPGB's subsequent decision to ignore the Stalinist atrocities, along with their insistence on towing the Moscow line led to massive fractures within the Party. The CPGB leadership failed to recognize these fractures and continually stifled any dissent. Unable to be quieted were the voices of Saville and Thompson. The two

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<sup>26</sup>Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: John Murray, 1959), 130-31.

historians began publishing *Reasoner*, a journal of dissent, from within the CPGB. They dedicated the journal to doing what the official publications of the party routinely refused to do, debate the issues arising from Khrushchev's revelations in his "Secret Speech". In a 1976 article for the *Socialist Register*, Saville recalled the implications of the Twentieth Party Congress and how the CPGB leadership ignored those implications. In it, he recounted the opposition to any discussion of the contents of Khrushchev's speech within the official publications and its effect on his and Thompson's decision to create the *Reasoner*. The historians felt the only way to reconcile the damage done to the party by the specter of Stalinism was to conduct a painful and honest discussion.<sup>27</sup> In an editorial in the first *Reasoner*, Thompson and Saville wrote that, "The shock and turmoil engendered by the revelations were the result of our general failure to apply a Marxist analysis to Socialist countries and to the Soviet Union in particular."<sup>28</sup> At this point, neither Thompson nor Saville intended to create a faction away from the Party. Their intent was to refocus the party and return to the tradition of Marxist analysis referred to in the quote above. Despite their desire to strengthen the party through democratization and discussion, the journal led to conflict with Party officials. By the appearance of the second issue of *Reasoner*, Saville and Thompson had been formally warned to cease publication. Despite the warning, the two historians decided to publish a final issue.

By the end of October 1956, the third issue of *Reasoner* was nearing press.

The editors decided to capitulate and dedicated the final pages to a farewell

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<sup>27</sup> Saville, "The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party," *Socialist Register* 13 (1976): 1-23.

<sup>28</sup> Editorial from *Reasoner* no. 1 reprinted in Saville, "The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party," 8.

editorial. The editorial explained their wish for the CPGB to create its own journal for open discussion with a more representative board. They hoped that such a journal would induce serious discussion about the direction of the Party without the air of factionalism their own journal seemed to elicit.<sup>29</sup> With the *Reasoner's* third and final issue days from completion, the Soviet Union sent a jolt throughout Europe by invading Hungary. Left with little choice, Saville and Thompson revised the third issue to include reaction to this devastating event.

### **The Hungarian Uprising**

In an effort to assert his authority and stave off his would be opponents, Khrushchev responded swiftly to opposition in Eastern Europe. In Poland, Stalinist forces within the government were met with resistance from other communists pushing for liberalization. The situation came to a head when the industrial city of Poznan erupted in violence following a railworkers' strike that evolved into a general strike. The Polish reformers saw an opportunity to blame the Stalinist policies for the unrest, and they took the opening to seize greater control of government affairs. They even reintroduced Wladyslaw Gomulka, who had been arrested previously for his perceived disloyalty to the Soviets, to government affairs. These moves upset the Moscow leadership, who quickly arrived in Warsaw, military in tow. The military took up positions as negotiations between Soviet and Polish officials commenced. Eventually, the Soviets pacified dissenters and narrowly

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<sup>29</sup> John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2003), 111.

avoided an armed confrontation.<sup>30</sup> However, in Hungary the Soviets would not show such mercy. Their invasion of that nation to quell the uprising would mark the apex of the conflict within the CPGB.

As shells burst over Budapest on November 4<sup>th</sup>, Saville and Thompson spent hours on the phone determining what response would appear in their forthcoming issue of *Reasoner*.<sup>31</sup> Already appearing in the issue prior to the escalation of the situation in Hungary was Thompson's article, "Through the Smoke of Budapest".<sup>32</sup> In the article Thompson wrote about the implications of Soviet actions (which up to that point had simply been occupation) and strongly denounced Stalinism as "socialist theory and practice which has lost the ingredient of humanity."<sup>33</sup> Eventually, Saville and Thompson's conversations led to an editorial piece calling for an immediate response by the CPGB to the Soviet Union's actions to stifle the workers and students of Hungary. Saville and Thompson created a list of four demands to be met by the CPGB and a course of action to be followed if the Party leadership failed to listen:

- The Executive Committee of the British Party must at once:
1. Dissociate itself publicly from the action of the Soviet Union in Hungary
  2. Demand the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops.
  3. Proclaim full and unequivocal solidarity with the Polish Workers' Party.
  4. Call District Congresses of our Party immediately and a National Congress in the New Year

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<sup>30</sup> Willie Thompson, *The Communist Movement Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 78-79.

<sup>31</sup> Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> E.P. Thompson, "Through the Smoke of Budapest," *Reasoner* (November 1956).

<sup>33</sup> Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 200.

If these demands are not met, we urge all those who, like ourselves, will dissociate themselves completely from the leadership of the British Communist Party, not to lose faith in Socialism, and to find ways of keeping together. We promise our readers that we will consult with others about the early formation of a new socialist journal.<sup>34</sup>

The demands were an attempt to address the unresolved issues of the Party's response to the reinstatement of Stalinist tactics in Hungary and the undemocratic leadership within the CPGB. Despite the seemingly flawed logic of maintaining a Stalinist position after the death of Stalin and the events of 1956, CPGB leadership refused to open the discussion and succumb to the demands of the historians of the *Reasoner* publication. They suspended Thompson and Saville for three months for continuing to publish from outside the official Party channels. This suspension was promptly met by the resignation of Saville and Thompson from the CPGB, both men having realized that their original hopes of discussion-cum-reform were impossible given the nature of the Party's leadership. The Party's long-held position as Soviet apologists had disastrous consequences. By the time the "smoke of Budapest" settled, the CPGB was down 7,000 of its 33,000 members. The CPGB would lose many prominent intellectuals such as Saville and Thompson, but perhaps even more damaging to the Party was the loss of trade union and labor leaders during this same crisis.<sup>35</sup>

That the Party failed to satisfy its intellectual wing was of little surprise. As Neal Wood wrote in his 1959 book, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, the CPGB, like other communist parties, "was converted from a group of revolutionary

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<sup>34</sup> Originally printed in *Reasoner* no. 3; reprinted in Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, 112.

<sup>35</sup> Beckett, *Enemy Within*, 133-35.

idealists into a monolithic, bureaucratic machine.”<sup>36</sup> Wood’s work also emphasized the lack of a place for the intellectual within the CPGB leadership, which undoubtedly led to increased tension between the Party and the eventual founders of the New Left.<sup>37</sup> In order to combat the “bureaucratic machine”, the New Left’s founders set out to create links between themselves and the other likeminded academics fleeing CPGB.

The New Left ultimately took shape around the publication of two journals. The first journal formed by the burgeoning New Left was the *New Reasoner*, founded by Saville and Thompson. The *New Reasoner* began publication in 1957 and, as its title indicated, followed the footsteps of the *Reasoner*.

### **From *Reasoner* to *New Reasoner***

True to their word, Saville and Thompson created a journal dedicated to socialist advances in both the international and British context. In the first issue alone, the topics at hand reached from the British Isles to the USSR to Kenya, and beyond. Internationally, *New Reasoner’s* efforts were to “stand with those workers and intellectuals in the Soviet Union and E. Europe who are fighting for that return to Communist principle and that extension of liberties which has been dubbed ‘de-Stalinisation’.”<sup>38</sup> In Britain, they hoped to align “with those socialists on the left wing of the Labour Party, or unattached to any party, who are fighting under very

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<sup>36</sup> Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, 196-200.

<sup>38</sup> John Saville and E.P. Thompson, “Editorial,” *New Reasoner* 1 (Summer 1957): 1.

different conditions, for a similar re-birth of principle within the movement.”<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps most importantly Saville and Thompson reiterated that their commitment was not to break with, but to reinforce, Marxist tradition. As is specifically detailed in the next chapter, they sought to reconnect with a Marxist tradition in Britain that included William Morris and socialist activist Tom Mann.<sup>40</sup> Thompson organized these traditions into the idea of socialist humanism, or a return of compassion and the agency of real men and women to the heart of socialist thought and the retreat of the bureaucratic dogmatism provided by the orthodoxies of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism. The first issue of *New Reasoner* contained a lengthy article on the topic, and appearing on each issue of the journal’s cover was the phrase, “A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism”.

Thompson was of the belief that a moralist, populist tradition had formerly existed in Britain. It could be traced back to William Morris and involved a litany of actions from the working classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries forward. Thompson’s socialist humanism rejected the dogmas of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, which he himself had somewhat accepted during his lengthy membership in the CPGB, and replaced them with an acceptance of the agency of man in making his own history. This was a rejection of the Stalinist emphasis on the centralized state. In denouncing Stalinism Thompson proposed an acceptance of the agency of people and the importance of intellect and morality through a return to a socialist tradition that, Thompson argued, had deep roots in Britain.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Saville and Thompson, “Editorial,” 1.

<sup>40</sup> Saville and Thompson, “Editorial,” 1.

<sup>41</sup> E.P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism,” *New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 105-43.



It was from this opening issue forward that the nature of socialism, both internationally and domestically, was discussed at length and frequently returned to notions of socialist humanism. It must be understood, however, that some within the first New Left were not inclined to agree with Thompson. The New Left was very much a collection of intellectuals intent on socialist advancement in Britain, but they often found themselves in disagreement about the means necessary to achieve their shared goal. The men and women contributing to *New Reasoner* generally represented the older arm of the New Left, but the youth were not to be outdone.

### ***The Universities & Left Review***

The *Universities & Left Review (ULR)*, like the *New Reasoner*, began publication in 1957. Also disenchanted with the events of 1956, the four young editors, ranging in age from 22 to 27, were Stuart Hall, Raphael (Ralph) Samuel, Gabriel Pearson, and Charles Taylor. Samuel and Pearson were British by birth, while Rhodes Scholars Hall and Taylor were from Jamaica and Canada respectively. Their *ULR* would prove to be a more widely read journal than *New Reasoner*, though both were important to the movement and shared many contributors.

The *New Reasoner* bloomed out of the fractures within the CPGB between long-standing members and the Party's leadership. Meanwhile, the *ULR* was the brainchild of a group of four young, Oxford-trained scholars who sought to simultaneously reinvigorate socialist debate and the apathetic youth of Britain. The first editorial outlined their desire to use their publication as a forum to advance socialism past its present position in British thought. In their minds, Britain had the

CPGB, still mired in the rhetoric of the 1930s on the one hand, and the Labour Party on the other. Neither orthodoxy would suffice, yet the debate had heretofore failed to capture the spirit of the younger minds in Britain. It was their journal's task to welcome all angles of socialist thought from all aspects of British society (political, economic, social, cultural, etc.) in an effort to inspire not only words, but also action through activity in the Left Review Clubs that would come to populate several cities in Britain.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the fact that the *ULR* and *The New Reasoner* were separate journals, several contributors wrote for both publications, including both E.P. Thompson and John Saville. Among other contributing authors to the *ULR* were several well-known socialist academics such as, Eric Hobsbawm, Isaac Deutscher, Raymond Williams, and former Fabian socialist G.D.H. Cole. The eclectic nature of its contributing authors (Hobsbawm, for example, bucked the trend set by his colleagues and remained a life-long member of the CPGB) mirrored the eclectic nature of the publication itself. For example, the second issue of the *ULR* contained a powerful call-to-action against nuclear proliferation alongside pieces on popular culture and "free cinema" movements. Perhaps this eclecticism helped the *ULR* succeed in obtaining a fairly broad readership and inspiring local discussion groups, or clubs.

### **The New Left Clubs**

Both the *ULR* and *New Reasoner* inspired New Left Clubs to spring up around Britain. The most famous of these clubs was the London Club. The Partisan, a

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<sup>42</sup> Stuart Hall, "Editorial," *Universities & Left Review* 1, (Spring 1957).

coffeehouse opened by *ULR* editor Raphael (Ralph) Samuel, accompanied the London Club. Both the coffeehouse and the club became a forum for debate and discussion. Stuart Hall estimated that, at its height in 1958-9, the London Club events drew three to four hundred visitors per meeting. These clubs played a major role in the realization of the intellectual, libertarian nature of New Left socialism.<sup>43</sup>

Free from the dogmatic dictation from above that poisoned the CPGB, New Left thought flourished through internal debate and discussion. As the journal was the forum for the intellectual heavyweights of the movement to hash out their theoretical and political differences, so too were the New Left Clubs for their local attendees. In addition to this anti-CPGB fostering of healthy discussion, the New Left Clubs embraced the intellectual nature of the movement. As will be apparent through subsequent chapters, this embrace of intellectualism would not be without its costs.

### **Effects of 1956 on the ULR**

Like the editors of *New Reasoner*, the men behind *ULR* were upset with the events of 1956. Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the resurrection of Stalinist practices in the violent suppression of the movement in Hungary, created a similar vein of dissent and became the impetus for this new direction among socialists associated with *ULR*. In addition to the two events that rocked the CPGB, the *ULR* was also disillusioned with the occurrence of a third event of 1956, the Suez Crisis.

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), 21-23.

In response to British and American refusal to help fund the Aswan Dam, Gamal Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in Egypt. Angered by this, the British and French backed an Israeli invasion of Egypt. The Israelis were successful in taking the Sinai Peninsula, and a force of British and French paratroopers laid waste to the towns of Port Said and Port Fouad. In response to this invasion, the international community was outraged. Americans and Soviets both called for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Egypt; a request that the belligerent parties would fulfill. Thus, without achieving its goal of reestablishing control of the Suez Canal, the British, French, and Israelis withdrew and the Suez Crisis came to an end.

The Suez Crisis symbolized the end of an era for Britain. In the bipolar world of the Cold War, Britain no longer enjoyed its former position of power on the global stage. Shamed, the former imperialist superpower was reduced to taking orders from its American allies. Back in Britain the Suez Crisis met strong resistance. It provided a spark that would ignite younger Leftists into action, and it created a conflict within Parliament. Many on the Left had grown tired of the peace between Labour and Conservative Parties in Parliament, and the Conservative-led Suez Crisis had seemingly provided an opportunity for Labour, and particularly the Left wing of the Labour Party, to seize the upper hand.

The effects of Suez and the other events of 1956 on the *ULR* are apparent in the number of articles dedicated to the crises. In nearly each of the seven issues there are articles dealing with, or making mention of, Hungary, Suez, and Stalinism. Clearly the year 1956 was a watershed for socialist intellectuals in Britain. It saw the dismantling of the official British Communist Party and the creation of a New

Left concerned with pushing forward the socialist tradition of Britain that had been lost during the years of dogmatic Stalinism. What would fail to materialize, however, was such a watershed for working class socialists. This lack of vigor for socialist change among working peoples would combine with other factors in Cold War Britain to undermine the hopes among some members of the New Left to carve out a new way forward for socialism in Britain.

After starting the journals in the wake of 1956, the two publications would exist through the end of the 1950s as separate entities. Though they shared contributors and certain themes such as the defense of the role of the intellectual, the opposition to Stalinism, and critiques of both Labour and Conservative policies in Britain, the two journals remained distinct. The *New Reasoner* bore the marks of a different generation. Its discussions of poetry, songs, and other populist traditions within working class Britain often sought to reconnect with earlier incarnations of socialism. Meanwhile, the *ULR*'s more youthful outlook on present cultural currents involved the emerging music and film scenes, things that were completely absent from *New Reasoner* publications. While these differences seemed to be superficial, the issues raised by the merger of the two journals in 1960 ultimately led to the end of the First New Left in Britain.

### **The New Left Review**

By the end of 1959 the editorial boards of *New Reasoner* and *ULR* began talking about combining the two voices of the New Left into a single publication. From the outset of this proposed venture there were potential conflicts that some

within the movement thought should preclude any merger from taking place. Chief among these opponents to unification was Ralph Miliband. Miliband was a Belgian Leftist and political theorist (he held positions at various universities in the UK and the US) who moved to London during the Second World War.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps unfortunately, Miliband's cohorts failed to heed his warning. The merger occurred in December of 1959, with the combining of the two editorial boards and the installation of Stuart Hall as full-time editor of the new publication, entitled the *New Left Review (NLR)*

In its final issue, the editors dedicated the *ULR's* editorial to the merger. The piece recounted the different origins of the two journals that would now become one. It traced the logic of merging the journals from these origins to their more recent collaboration. From the beginning, the *ULR* and *New Reasoner* shared contributors and much in the way of their ambitions for the movement. As the journals continued to grow so too did their level of collaboration. In addition to the work they did on their publications, the editors of both journals routinely worked together in the New Left Clubs, worker's conferences, and education opportunities within various communities. By the time the decision was made to combine the journals, the two had been offering joint subscriptions for some time. On the surface, the merger made a lot of sense. It would streamline the movement and perhaps offer the more consistent leadership that would be needed if it were to ever become a full-fledged political movement.

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Newman, "Miliband, Ralph (1924–1994)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/55138> (accessed April 18, 2011).

Despite the seemingly sanguine circumstances surrounding the merger, the benefit of hindsight would dictate that the merger perhaps should not have taken place. Historian Michael Kenny details the trouble that merging the two successful journals brought to the first generation of the New Left in his book, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin*. Kenny describes the potential for failure in the merger by claiming that the political factors of the period combined with the personal conflict among members of the New Left to create a less-than-ideal climate for unification.<sup>45</sup> Kenny is correct in his assertions, though hindsight has afforded him some luxury. In fact the first New Left had political success in influencing Labour's platform against the nuclear bomb in 1961, and it was not until after the group was shut out of decision making and the resolution on the bomb reversed in 1962 that politics began to be as damaging to the group as the internal personal conflicts.<sup>46</sup>

In his memoirs, John Saville gives his personal account for why the merger may not have been the proper choice. He began by describing the advice given to him by some of his colleagues against the merger, namely Ralph Miliband. Miliband, who Saville admits he was becoming closer to during the period just before the unification of the publications, opposed the merger from the outset. Being a contributor to both journals, Miliband was familiar with the two groups. While they shared much in common, Miliband felt that the administrative styles of the two differed greatly. Saville, much later, would come to agree that the traditions and backgrounds of the two boards were not necessarily as compatible as their

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<sup>45</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*, 23-32.

<sup>46</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*, 119-64.

ambitions and politics. Admittedly, he and Thompson's own personalities, and the way problems at *New Reasoner* were solved through intense and often heated discussions, were not conducive for winning over new coworkers. In other words, the accepted culture for *New Reasoner* contributors involved a willingness to accept criticism that does not mince words, whereas, the *ULR* editors were not used to the rigors of working with the intellectually brilliant, yet potentially verbally wounding, Thompson. The difficulties of merging divergent personalities combined with the ever-changing politics of the time to strain working relationships. In particular, Saville's memoirs make mention of the crises surrounding nuclear proliferation that caused attention to be diverted away from handling the internal issues of the *NLR*.<sup>47</sup>

### **The end of the First New Left**

With the merging of the journals into the *NLR*, this first wave of the New Left came to an end. Born out of the turmoil of 1956, the New Left would find itself divided by the end of the *NLR*'s third year of publication. Prior to that, Saville had resigned his position on the editorial board and was replaced by Thompson as chair. Thompson was dissatisfied with the direction of the *Review* and voiced his displeasure at the "eclecticism" of its content.<sup>48</sup> Thompson's difficult working relationship with Stuart Hall made for problems within the *NLR*. Eventually, Hall would resign his post as the editor and be replaced by Perry Anderson. Anderson immediately shifted the direction of the journal away from socialist, ushering in the

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<sup>47</sup> Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, 122-24.

<sup>48</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*, 35-37.



group's second chapter. This, understandably, upset several within the first wave of the New Left, though probably none more than E.P. Thompson.<sup>49</sup>

Anderson's point of divergence with Thompson was Thompson's core ideology, socialist humanism. To Anderson, socialist humanism and the belief in an indigenous British Marxist tradition were both falsehoods. As such, Anderson rejected socialist humanism and began focusing the journal on the historical materialism promoted by continental Marxists in the early 1960s. No longer would the New Left center most of their attention on issues pertinent to Britons. Rather, the *NLR* took an internationalist direction. The politics of "third world" Marxism came to dominate much of the material printed by the journal, and given the issues in global politics of the time period, this is understandable.

The feud between Thompson and Anderson over socialist humanism would carry on for decades. Their debates filled the pages of journals and books, and each combatant would score his fair share of points. Anderson ridiculed Thompson for his faulty logic in basing his notion of socialist humanism on an innate morality in the average man. Thompson responded with historical examples in defense of his own assertions and then would chastise Anderson for his submission to a Marxist ideology that was devoid of any sense of human agency at all.<sup>50</sup> In the end, it did not matter the particulars of their infighting, because by the end of the First New Left, whatever momentum had built up into a potential political movement began to

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<sup>49</sup> A point to be considered further in Chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> Dennis L. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 230-35.

dissipate. The dissolution of New Left Clubs following the editorial shift served as a prime indicator of this decline.

In the period of time since the First New Left operated as a movement, scholars have criticized the practicality of the group's vision. They regard the First New Left as having failed to inspire tangible political change on the British national stage. While this is true, this failure must be contextualized. The intentions of the group to begin with were not to create a traditional vehicle for political change. The New Left spawned from a need for socialists to create a way forward for critical discussions about socialism in the wake of Stalinism. Along the way, political and popular aspirations cropped up in the editorials and letters published by the *New Reasoner* and *ULR*. The creation of clubs and participation in various activist campaigns furthered these ambitions. Eventually the First New Left dissipated without accomplishing any tangible political objectives. However, through the various debates and discussions within their journal(s), the New Left proved that there was indeed a place within socialism to debate and eliminate hegemonic bureaucracy. This space was entirely necessary for ideas to be hashed out and to overcome the challenges within socialist theory and practice illuminated by Stalinism. The following chapter delves deeper into the New Left's preoccupation with Stalinism and the impact it had on the group.

## Chapter 2

From its inception in 1956 through its dissipation in the early 1960s, the first British New Left\* represented a distinct shift away from other Leftist trajectories in Britain. In structure, it was in stark contrast to both the dogmatic nature of Party Communism and the bureaucratic electioneering of Labour. It remained an unstructured movement, or, as many preferred to call it, a “mood”.<sup>51</sup> In principle, it adhered to notions of reason and humanism, which could be seen as qualities in contrast to existing examples of Communism. It was in the face of their current reality that the New Left sought a different trajectory for socialism. Ultimately this course led Britain no closer to socialism. However, when one considers the conditions within which the New Left came about, there really could be no trajectory other than that of a loose collection of likeminded intellectuals.

Despite the apparent novelty of the New Left’s positions, i.e. that they rejected the structural and ideological programs of the CPGB and Labour, the opening editorial of the group’s publication, *New Reasoner*, asserted that they did not want a break with socialism or Marxist traditions. Instead, they proposed a return to them.<sup>52</sup> This assertion by editors John Saville and E.P. Thompson referred to the men's shared notion that the rise of Stalinism represented a hijacking of Marxist thought, diverting the British Left from a native Marxist tradition characterized by reason, agency, moralism, and humanism derived from the

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\* Going forward, the term “New Left” will always designate the British New Left. Any mention of New Left movements in other nations will include the appropriate adjective indicating a country, i.e. “French New Left”.

<sup>51</sup> John Saville and E.P. Thompson, “Letter to our Readers,” *New Reasoner* 6 (1959): 137-40.

<sup>52</sup> Saville and Thompson, “Editorial,” 1.

nineteenth century wisdom of Robert Owen, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Tom Mann, William Morris, and others. The many contributors to the first New Left in Britain were, despite their disagreements, all part of an attempt to bring socialism in Britain forward by taking a look backward. That is to say, that the New Left saw itself as a continuation of an earlier tradition of socialist humanism within leftist thought in Britain, and that this tradition was the only way to advance socialism in the aftermath of Stalinism and the establishment of social democracy.

The contents of the first New Left's journals, *New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review (ULR)*, provide the necessary window into the mindset of the architects of the New Left's mood and the arguments that framed their rationales. Since they were not seeking votes or looking for money beyond the necessary expenses of running the journals, the New Left's sole interest lay in forging a path toward socialist change, through its articles and the promotion of political discussion and involvement.

It does not take a close reading of New Left works to discover that its contributors differed greatly in their opinions. As such, it is difficult to pin down how the New Left perceived itself as a whole. The dynamics of an organization of intellectuals, each with formidable opinions of his or her own, does not readily lend itself to uniformity. Within the broader framework of the New Left existed plenty of room for debate and difference in opinion. These differences manifested themselves in the distinguishing characteristics of the two major journals.

The *New Reasoner's* Yorkshire-based and slightly older editorial staff presented a different product than did their younger, London-centered cohorts from

the *ULR*. The *ULR* paid closer attention to cultural trends, especially youth movements, than did the *New Reasoner*. The generational difference most noticeably appears in comparing the poems and traditional working people's songs of the *New Reasoner* and to the more youthful focus on the arts, music, and film in the *ULR*. Despite these distinctions, both publications often shared contributors and, most importantly, a broad acceptance of the importance in advancing a similar brand of socialism in Britain.

This chapter does not propose to place judgment on the theoretical and political positions of the New Left. Too often within the secondary literature on the group, the New Left is addressed first through perceptions developed decades after the conditions under which the movement began ceased to exist. What tends to happen in most accounts of the New Left is a critique of their positions rather than an attempt to explain and understand them in their own context. Perhaps this is because the secondary literature on the New Left is mostly done through the discipline of political science. It is curious that analysis of a group, largely made up of historians, would lack historical perspective, but this is the case.<sup>53</sup>

Following the path of the historian rather than the political scientist, this chapter addresses the New Left through its own words and with an understanding of its historical context. The chapter explores the assertion that the first New Left was a conscious return to past traditions within leftist thought in Britain. It does

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<sup>53</sup> There are pieces on individuals within the New Left that sufficiently historicize the movement, but the two monographs dedicated to the New Left as a whole fail to do this, i.e. Michael Kenny, *The First New Left* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995) and Chun Lin, *British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

this, first, through exploring what tradition the New Left was seeking to invoke. Then, the chapter moves on to look at how the New Left's publications furthered this tradition by positioning it as an alternative to the outrages of Stalinism. Finally, it analyzes the form of the movement, in particular the perception of the New Left as a "mood", to show the reader how conditions within left politics framed the actions of the early New Left while simultaneously reaffirming the decision to return to an earlier socialist tradition. As many New Left intellectuals were proponents of the agency of working peoples to shape their own histories, it would be inappropriate to treat these men and women solely as the victims of the political, social, and cultural turmoil they found themselves in. Rather, it should be apparent that the making of the New Left in Britain, like other events in history, was nothing more or less than the consequence of human beings behaving in a way they, at the time, deemed appropriate to the conditions in which they found themselves.

### **Rejecting Stalinism; Embracing the "Mood"**

"Our business, I repeat, is the making of Socialists, *ie.*, convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible. When we have enough people of that way of thinking, *they* will find out what action is necessary for putting their principles in practice. Until we have that mass of opinion, action for a general change that will benefit the whole people is *impossible*...Therefore, I say, make Socialists. We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful..."<sup>54</sup>  
William Morris, 1889

The spirit of William Morris's speeches and pamphlets exemplified a native tradition of socialist thought in Britain. Influenced by Karl Marx, John Ruskin,

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<sup>54</sup> William Morris, "Where Are We Now?" *Commonweal*, 6, no. 253 (15 November 1890): 361-62.

Thomas Carlyle, and utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, Morris carried on this tradition during the late nineteenth century. Nearly three quarters of a century later, his thoughts influenced a new generation of leftists in Britain seeking to make their own contributions to socialist advances in the United Kingdom and beyond. In 1955, E.P. Thompson published a biography of William Morris. In it, Thompson detailed Morris's intellectual evolution. Through the works of Carlyle and Ruskin, Morris soon transitioned, in Thompson's terms, from a "romantic" to a "revolutionary".<sup>55</sup> By the late 1850s, Morris developed his "hatred" for capitalism, and, by his later life, he would forgo his artistic pursuits in favor of socio-political endeavors. In the early 1880s Morris made his complete jump to socialism.

Morris read works from Marx, Henry George, and Robert Owen, among others, in order to better understand and articulate his own convictions.<sup>56</sup> Showing his true colors for the first time in 1883, Morris addressed an audience in the hall of University College, Oxford and professed himself a member of a socialist society and appealed to those like-minded people of the middle class to join him in support of the working class and their struggle against industrial capitalism.<sup>57</sup> Despite his plea to the middle class, Morris was most assuredly not a Fabian socialist<sup>58</sup>, and routinely found himself at odds with the group.<sup>59</sup> However, Morris did identify with a moralist tradition that, by the time he was active, no longer appeared in Marx's

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<sup>55</sup> E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 22-39.

<sup>56</sup> Thompson, *William Morris*, 269.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *William Morris*, 271-74.

<sup>58</sup> The Fabian Society promoted a gradual socialist change as opposed to revolutionary and tended to attract less working class and more middle class constituencies.

<sup>59</sup> Thompson, *William Morris*, 546-48.

own works. As the New Left later pointed out, the socialism of Morris and others within the British tradition was less related to the economic determinism of later Marx and more akin to the humanistic works of the younger Marx.<sup>60</sup>

In the mid-1950s, the British New Left found itself faced with the tasks of challenging contemporary ideologies within Marxism and battling the apathy of the left in Britain. John Saville succinctly stated that this apathy, born out of the successes of the welfare state and full employment within Britain, spawned an intellectual collapse among the left.<sup>61</sup> As such, the *New Reasoner* stated as its goal, to re-forge the bonds between the intellectual left and the laborers of Britain.<sup>62</sup> In both the *New Reasoner* and the *ULR*, contributors evoked the spirit of a tradition of socialism in Britain, often exemplified by Morris. In short, the loosely affiliated members of the first New Left viewed their movement as a return to a native socialist tradition in Britain and their works as an extension of this tradition.

Despite the continued referral to a British socialist tradition, the New Left intellectuals were very aware of the need to connect the struggles of workers within Britain to those of other Western nations, Eastern Europe, East Asia, and beyond. As such, the New Left embodied a sort of resetting of British socialism. The contributors aspired to circumvent the interruptions of Stalinist domination of Marxist thought and reconnect to an earlier, more humanist approach to Marxism. At the same time, they wished to maintain an astute awareness of contemporary circumstances, both at home and abroad.

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<sup>60</sup> Kenneth Muir, "Marx's Conversion to Communism," *New Reasoner* 3 (1957): 57-64.

<sup>61</sup> Saville, "The Welfare State," *New Reasoner* 3 (1957): 5-25.

<sup>62</sup> Saville and Thompson, "Editorial," 1.



Among the aspects of the New Left that most recognizably displayed certain members' belief in a return to native socialist traditions, was the notion of socialist humanism. Socialist humanism, simply put, embodied an attempt to invoke human agency into the stark, economically deterministic world of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist theory. Thompson's vision for a more humanist form of socialism, by no means an unprecedented notion, possessed a history of its own. However, the orthodoxies of Marx's later writings and the emergence of Stalinism supplanted much of the earlier humanistic tradition in socialist thought.

It was socialist humanism, as a way forward and against the supposed anti-humanism of the Stalinists, which bound the early New Left. The editorial boards of both the *New Reasoner* and the *ULR* considered their publications to be journals of socialist humanism, with the former actually including the subtitle, "*a Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism*", on the cover of each issue.<sup>63</sup> Before spelling out the ideas of socialist humanism more completely, it is important to realize the gravity of the very existence of this alternative socialist perspective.

That this term was adopted, articulated, and debated across multiple issues of both New Left journals speaks to the scope of the turmoil within far left ideologies in the wake of Stalinism and the rise of social democracy in the form of the welfare state. The hangover from 1956 bred disenchantment and defection. With the Cold War entering its second decade, the events of 1956 furthered attacks against socialism. In a West where the adoption of socialist-inspired programs through the

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<sup>63</sup> *ULR's* editors included socialist humanism in many editorials, most notably inclusion of the furthering of socialist humanism as one of their journal's four main purposes in the editorial of *ULR* 4.

welfare state allowed countries to provide for citizens like never before, charges of Stalinism alienated Marxists. The effects of this alienation were recognizable in the persistent beating of the proverbial “dead horse” of Stalinism within New Left publications. As a window into the minds of those forming and advancing the New Left, this obsession with espousing a return to socialist humanism (while railing against Stalinism) exposed the group’s sensitivity to the popular perception that the evils of Stalinism exemplified the ills inherent in any form of Marxist or socialist society, and that a return to a native socialist tradition that valued the agency of man over dogmatic ideology provided the only way forward for British socialism.

New Left writers embraced the need to counter Stalinism with evidence of an alternative socialist tradition. This resulted in repeated use of the name of British socialists and humanists as an almost Pavlovian device to condition readers to accept the New Left as proponents of this alternative tradition. The invocation of William Morris, particularly, often appeared in articles to serve no other purpose than to signal the author’s alignment with the tradition and remind the readers of its existence and desirability. For example, Ralph Miliband made a passing mention of Labour policy as antithetical to the ideas of Owen and Morris that served little purpose other than illustrating the importance of the nineteenth-century socialist tradition those men embodied.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, New Left contributor and co-editor of *ULR*, Ralph Samuel outlined the need for socialists to constantly speak of the socialist humanist tradition and project it into “every discussion of social and

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<sup>64</sup> Ralph Miliband, “The Transition to the Transition,” *New Reasoner* 6 (1958): 39.

political policy.”<sup>65</sup> In all, the New Left was preoccupied with providing an alternative socialist tradition that was very different from Stalinism, yet grounded in something historically British.

### **Stalinism’s Hold on the Attention of the New Left**

The New Left undoubtedly saw itself as a return to a native socialist tradition. What follows is a progression of how that tradition became evident through the way the New Left viewed socialism’s prospects in 1950s Britain. In order to explain how the scholars of the New Left arrived at the decision to promote a return to humanistic socialism, we must understand the group’s acute awareness of the Stalinist roadblock. Also, important to these intellectuals was the necessity for socialists seeking to further their cause to clearly condemn and separate themselves from Stalinism’s dearth of moral behavior. This was the principal preoccupation of the New Left and can be seen throughout the life of the two principal publications.

Even a brief glimpse through the archived issues of the *New Reasoner*, and to a slightly lesser extent the *ULR*, reveals the damage Stalinism inflicted into the psyches of the New Left’s contributors. In the *New Reasoner*, the term “Stalinist” appears multiple times in each of the ten issues. In the first issue of the *New Reasoner* alone, Stalinists/Stalinism appeared as a theme in the opening editorial by Saville and Thompson and in individual articles by Hyman Levy, Malcolm MacEwen, Leonard Hussey, Peter Fryer, Saville, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roman Zimand, and

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<sup>65</sup> Ralph Samuel, “New Authoritarianism – New Left,” *ULR* 5 (1958): 69.

Thompson. In addition, the journal printed a translation of a story by Hungarian communist Tibor Dery, which detailed the conditions the Hungarians endured under “Stalinist perversions of socialism.”<sup>66</sup> In total, the only portions of the first issue of the *New Reasoner* that do not directly attack the ideology were two articles on the Mau Mau uprising, a historical piece on perceptions of Marxism in Victorian England by Eric Hobsbawm, and the arts portion of the journal dedicated to commentaries and printed songs and poetry.<sup>67</sup> Obviously the wounds of Stalinism and 1956 still gaped as the first issue of *New Reasoner* went to press, and they showed few signs of closing throughout the journal’s three year history. Stalinism’s long shadow over Marxist ideology continued to be a point of concern for the New Left’s contributors in each subsequent issue.

Though this is less true for the tenth and final issue, the other nine all dedicated significant portions of their length to discussions of what Marxists, socialists, and Communists were to make of their worldview in the aftermath of Stalinism.<sup>68</sup> While several of the anti-Stalinist pieces appearing between *New Reasoner* 2 and 10 were independent works of scholarship, many of them existed as responses and reiterations from E.P. Thompson’s contribution in *New Reasoner* 1, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines”.

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<sup>66</sup> Tibor Dery, “Behind the Brick Wall,” *New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 39.

<sup>67</sup> Within the commentary on the arts, Bernard Stevens’ “Open Letter to Shostakovich” included portions that criticized Stalinist oppression of creative endeavors. Stevens never used the word “Stalinism” though he commonly referred to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the bureaucratic “Soviet system” as detrimental to the composers of the Soviet Union.

<sup>68</sup> Issues 2-9 of the *New Reasoner* all included at least three articles dealing with the issue of Stalinism. The seventh issue contained nine separate articles and/or responses on the topic, the most since the first issue. Issues 2, 3, 4, and 9 were also heavy on the topic with either 6 or 7 pieces in each issue.

While Thompson did not speak for the entire New Left by any means, he was the most vocal commentator of the New Left.<sup>69</sup> Thompson's "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines" was the longest piece published in any issue of *New Reasoner*, running to forty pages in total. He used a significant portion of this space to define socialist humanism, largely in terms of what it was not. In order to fully understand the New Left as it developed, this article, and the debates it spawned in later issues are necessary reading. Given the turmoil in Communism at the time (see Introduction), Thompson carefully sought to separate the New Left through this critique of Stalinism yet remained determined not to encourage further defections from Marxism more generally. It was surely no accident that the article began with quotes from an earlier, more humanistic, Marx.<sup>70</sup> He viewed the prospects of socialism taking hold as dependent upon the revolutionary fervor of the people. This fervor for socialist change, in turn, depended on the viability of socialism as a resolution to the ills of exploitation and private ownership. Understanding this allows one to develop a picture of how Thompson perceived himself and the ideas he would articulate in "Socialist Humanism."

Near the forefront of Thompson's concerns stood his fear of the public's confusion over socialism, Marxism, and Stalinism. He employed a specific

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<sup>69</sup> Other leading figures, namely Ralph Miliband, John Saville, Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams, tended to contribute pieces addressing cultural and political trends and events more than on the state of the New Left itself. Therefore Thompson's primacy in this section simply reflects the importance of his piece on socialist humanism and the ripple effect it produced throughout the New Left. It should not be taken to mean that there existed a complete consensus of opinion among the scholars or that Thompson is more or less important to the New Left.

<sup>70</sup> The quote used: "The standpoint of the old materialism is 'civil society'; the standpoint of the new is human society or socialised humanity." - Marx, 10<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach.

vocabulary in spinning the turmoil within Communist movements worldwide as a “revolt within the international Communist movement against ‘Stalinism’”. The article repeatedly represented Stalinism as a perversion of Marxism and as the result of an orthodoxy reliant on false ideology.<sup>71</sup> For example, Thompson suggested that Stalinism distorted the meaning of Marx’s base/superstructure model. He contended that the model originated as a metaphor to clarify an “image of men changing in society”, yet Stalin twisted it into a “mechanical model, operating semi-automatically and independently of conscious human agency.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore disregarding Marxism altogether because of the damage done by Stalinism would be the equivalent of, as fellow New Left contributor Ronald Meek remarked in a slightly different context, “throwing out the Marxist baby with the Stalinist bathwater.”<sup>73</sup>

Separating Stalinism from Communism, and socialism more generally, early in the article allowed Thompson to remain focused on promoting a socialist answer for Britain while removing British socialism from the specter of Soviet atrocities. Furthering his ideas, Thompson insisted that a new way forward involved a look backward to the roots of socialist humanism. The answer was not to abandon Marxism, but to reclaim it.

In advocating a return to a socialist tradition through a rejection of Stalinism, the New Left accomplished two things. First, and most simply, they provided an alternative way forward for socialism that avoided the traps of Stalinism. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they did so by circumventing Stalinism all together.

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<sup>71</sup> Thompson, “Socialist Humanism,” 107-8.

<sup>72</sup> Thompson, “Socialist Humanism,” 113.

<sup>73</sup> Ronald Meek, “Economics for the Age of Oligopoly,” *New Reasoner* 8 (1959): 47.

By reestablishing the socialism of the pre-Stalinist socialist movements within Britain, the New Left positioned itself to avoid the pitfalls of synonymy with Stalinism while simultaneously validating its own existence through historical precedence.

### **The Mood**

In addition to their rejection of Stalinism in favor of socialist humanism, the New Left's structure, or lack thereof, also symbolized the desired return to Britain's socialist past. The Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain existed as the two major organizations dominating the British labour movement. The literature on the New Left often criticizes the group for failing to materialize into a viable political alternative to the two formal parties. Michael Kenny and Lin Chun both state as much in asserting that the lack of organization into a full-fledged movement, with central leadership and all, resulted in the ultimate failure of the group.<sup>74</sup> This evaluation, perhaps a valid assessment of the group's political prospects, is not useful for a historical understanding of the New Left. Rather, a return to the pages of *New Reasoner* and *ULR* is far more useful in attempting to compare the New Left's organizational form with its ideological basis.

The New Left intellectuals occasionally referred to their faction as a "mood". From their perspective, the New Left was not just the people writing in the journals, protesting nuclear weapons, or debating in club meetings; it was also a prevailing condition that, they hoped, could inspire Britons to action. The mood was best

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<sup>74</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*; Chun, *The British New Left*.

described in the final pages of *New Reasoner* 6, where Saville and Thompson's "Letter to Our Readers" portion detailed the concept.<sup>75</sup> The opening paragraph listed the scope of the mood:

"Very slowly, and sometimes with more sound than substance, it does seem that a 'new left' is coming into being in this country. As yet it has neither a coherent centre nor any clear policies; it's still a mood rather than a movement. It's made up of the most diverse elements: members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, veteran leftwingers from the unions and 'Tribune' readers, young people shocked by the Notting Hill riots, Victory for Socialism supporters, anti-Establishment crusaders from the universities, dissident Communists, striking new roots in the labour movement. It stretches from G. D. H. Cole to John Homer, and from Bill Jones, the busmen's leader, to Lindsay Anderson, film-maker and critic."<sup>76</sup>

With this statement, the editors of *New Reasoner* effectively spread the cause across the gamut of the Labour movement. The mention of causes such as the anti-nuclear movement (CND) and the struggle against racial oppression (Notting Hill riots) provided some impression of the group's positions. Still, the vagueness of the statement revealed the New Left's ambitions of permeating the myriad causes of the left. Also of note, the deliberate coupling of intellectuals (Cole and Anderson) with trade-unionists (Homer and Jones) in the last sentence intentionally underscored the realization that the New Left intellectuals were of little consequence without the cooperation of Britain's working people. This essential idea existed among the New Left since its inception.<sup>77</sup> The mood served as a mechanism for the proposed return

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<sup>75</sup> The mood is referred to in early issues, namely the fourth issue, but the article in the sixth issue goes into more detail about the mood than the others.

<sup>76</sup> Saville and Thompson, "Letter to Our Readers," *New Reasoner* 6, 137.

<sup>77</sup> For example, the goal stated in the opening editorial of *New Reasoner* 1 to reforge the bonds between the British intellectuals and the British working class.



to the humanist tradition within British socialism and the possibility of continuing the Morrisonian tradition of “making socialists”.

In addition to educating and “making” socialists, the New Left’s preference to be seen as a mood served other distinct, practical purposes for the group – a logical choice given the historical context. The mood would serve as a means to avoid the traps of the CPGB and the Labour Party. The original defection of many prominent members of the New Left from the official arm of Communism in Britain stemmed from the CPGB’s lack of democratic structure, refusal to denounce the actions Soviet leadership, and refusal to allow dissent or debate within the Party. Lacking structure gave them a flexibility which allowed them to avoid any resemblance to the CPGB bureaucracy.

The mood contained no connotation of establishing an official central leadership. As such, contributors to the journals, protestors, club attendees, and workers were free to enter and exit debates as they saw fit. Rather than directions for action coming from the leadership, the New Left facilitated grass-roots level action through the clubs that sprung up throughout Britain, the creation of the Partisan coffeehouse in London, and the constant participation of its members in a myriad of social and political causes. This lack of centralized leadership also limited any strict dogmatism such as that of the CPGB. Socialist humanism would continue to be refined and debated.

The structure of the New Left as a mood complimented the goals of the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* to provide sufficient space for socialists to voice their opinions, in agreement or otherwise, on the Britain they sought to create. Being understood as

part of a malleable mood and with no pretenses that anything in either journal would become doctrine, the publications could spread their attention to a wide array of topics. In each issue there were articles on the state of Britain alongside socialist humanist analyses of international affairs. Each issue also contained space for responses and discussion. These occasionally came in the form of letters and other times as article length rejoinders. From the original article on socialist humanism in *New Reasoner* 1, there came all manner of critiques and compliments.

For example, in the second issue Harry Hanson and Charles Taylor provided their assessment of Thompson's treatment of Stalinism and his vision of socialist humanism. This was followed by Alisdair MacIntyre's deeply philosophical piece on the how recent critiques of Stalinism and Marxism could be the basis for a reevaluation of morality.<sup>78</sup> The MacIntyre article spawned its own set of responses.<sup>79</sup> All the while, the original authors offered clarifications and rebuttals to the responses. In all, the journals invigorated those intellectuals who had, prior to the emergence of the New Left, grown disillusioned with the prospect for finding a genuine vehicle for debate and discussion outside of the Party's rigidity.

In addition to providing a forum for debate, the journals permitted the New Left to widen the scope of issues with which it concerned itself. As a movement reliant on the mood of the people, the New Left quickly responded to events. When 1958's Notting Hill race-riots invigorated outrage, the New Left not only spoke out against the horrors of "racialism", but it also took the opportunity to point to the

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<sup>78</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre, "From the Moral Wilderness," *New Reasoner* 7 (1958): 91-100.

<sup>79</sup> Harry Hanson, "How Wild is My Wilderness," *New Reasoner* 9 (1959): 99-107; Mervyn Jones, "The Moral Wilderness," *New Reasoner* 9 (1959): 107-10.

riots and other instances of hooliganism as the product of a failure to create a humanistic society.<sup>80</sup> The group's involvement with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the 1958 march on the Aldermaston atomic facility provided another example of the New Left making its way into various populist causes. By latching onto issues important to diverse sections of the population and reframing those issues as evidence of the benefits of socialist humanism, the New Left hoped to find the traction necessary to further their cause and unify factions.

The New Left sought to occupy a space that overlapped and remained apart from the labour movement's established parties. Even in the form of a mood this proved difficult, though existence as an actual movement or party would have most likely rendered it impossible. In maintaining loyalty to no particular political organization, the New Left could engage with non-affiliated socialists as well as those that occupied the periphery of the established parties. The mood contrasted with the prevailing characteristics of the Labour Party in that it provided the space for intellectuals to become more intimately involved in the labour movement.<sup>81</sup> The establishment of clubs, initially in London by the *ULR* crowd and then throughout Britain, created a space for the mood to manifest itself in the form of discussions and lectures and showed its ability to help the New Left appeal to students, intellectuals, and working people.

In the minds of the editorial staff of both journals, the emergence of such a mood appeared as an organic product of the push for a more humanistic and open

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<sup>80</sup> Raphael Samuel, "New Authoritarianism – New Left," 67-69.

<sup>81</sup> The anti-intellectualism of the Party and the relationship between the New Left and Labour warrants its own discussion, which I will conduct in a subsequent chapter so as not to stray from this discussion of the New Left as a mood.

socialism.<sup>82</sup> In recognizing the existence of the mood, the editors of both journals made mention of their duty to respond through the content of their journals and grass-roots outreach to other socialists. All the while, the editors maintained that the integrity of the mood should not be compromised. The editors of the *New Reasoner* continued on in their sixth issue's address to their readers to state that they preferred that the mood not "jell" to soon.<sup>83</sup> Naturally, the instinct of any group with political aspirations would be to hone in and organize to capitalize on whatever popular sentiments they enjoyed. However, this was counter to the New Left notion of what was necessary in the wake of Stalinism and Labour dominance of left politics. The movement was too diverse in its make up and the concerns of the groups involved varied too widely, and as the editors remarked, "any attempt to press all these people at once into some new card-holding contingent will defeat its own ends."<sup>84</sup> Despite the fact that recent works bring into question the decision to remain as an unstructured movement, it is clear from the context from which the New Left emerged that it was a reasonable ideological or political choice.

While the socialist humanism of Britain's past often involved commitment to a defined group, such as Morris's Socialist League, the New Left's lack of such an establishment should not be seen as detrimental to their purpose of advancing the tradition of socialist humanism into the Cold War era. The New Left's preference to avoid instituting a dogma on their movement prematurely followed Morris's own opinions about the proper development of socialism:

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<sup>82</sup> Saville and Thompson, "Letter to Our Readers" *New Reasoner* 6, 137.

<sup>83</sup> Saville and Thompson, "Letter to Our Readers" *New Reasoner* 6, 137.

<sup>84</sup> Saville and Thompson, "Letter to Our Readers" *New Reasoner* 6, 138.

“When we have enough people of that way of thinking, *they* will find out what action is necessary for putting their principles in practice. Until we have that mass of opinion, action for a general change that will benefit the whole people is *impossible...*”<sup>85</sup>

The contributors to the journals of the New Left assessed their situation in relation to what would best promote their aims. As illustrated above, the mood clearly fit these aims in a way they felt that a traditional organization could not.

## **Conclusion**

The New Left emerged out of the turmoil of 1956 and the shadow of Stalinism with a clear agenda. They desired a reassertion of the agency and reason of human beings into what had become an inhumane doctrine. In order to accomplish this, the New Left sought not to abandon Marxism altogether or shoot off in a fundamentally new direction. Rather, the intellectuals of the first New Left in Britain felt it appropriate to go back to the pre-Stalinist perceptions of Marxism, to revisit the works of the younger more humanistic Marx himself, and to coherently articulate that Stalinism was not an inevitable outcome of Marxist philosophy. As a way forward for British socialism they connected the concerns of their present with the ideas from socialism’s past in Britain.

The New Left in Britain envisioned their work as a continuation of the work of the socialist humanists of the nineteenth century. Through the approach of William Morris, Tom Mann, and others, the New Left addressed socialism’s flaws and debated extensively on how these flaws could best be rectified to provide a way forward. Through their journals, club meetings, and activism the New Left stoked

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<sup>85</sup> Morris, “Where Are We Now?,” 361-62.

the flames of a fledgling mood to further their vision for a socialist humanism taking hold in Britain. While this, ultimately, did not happen, the New Left should not continue to be assessed as a failure. Such an assessment fails to hold up to the historical record and neglects to account for the conditions present at the making of this first New Left.

### Chapter 3

The British New Left's attempted return to earlier socialist traditions and its contentment with maintaining its lack of form as a mood provided it with the resources to further socialism in Britain. While the intellectual nature of the movement never progressed into a massive grassroots push for socialism, and the first New Left ultimately gave way to a second, its attempts to achieve change through traditional political avenues, however unsuccessful, should not go unrecognized. Analysis of these failures and the reasons behind them provides the topic for the following chapter.

Occupying the space between the two larger political organizations of the British left, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Labour Party, the loosely connected intellectuals that comprised the New Left avoided becoming a static organization that competed with these two entities. Rather, the New Left participated in parliamentary politics in much the same way that it got involved in anything else, through situational analysis and individual ambition. If the traditional political mechanisms failed to meet the New Left's objective of furthering socialism, then the New Left entered the fray with its own notions of practical applications of socialist policy. It should also be remembered that the New Left was not a single entity but a loose conglomeration of socialist intellectuals. Therefore, the New Left's response to political stimuli was never monolithic.

Given the lack of an organized political body, the intellectuals and working people affiliated with the New Left often associated, simultaneously, with other political parties and movements. Historian Eric Hobsbawm, for example, could be

considered a bridge between Old and New Lefts because he remained with the CPGB when his cohorts in the New Left were resigning in droves. Despite continued CPGB membership, Hobsbawm contributed to the New Left publications and the furthering of the mood for socialist change as a whole. Others involved themselves with the New Left's clubs, publications, and activism while maintaining their allegiance to the Labour Party. It cannot be overstated that, as the main arm of the labour movement, the Labour Party commanded the left of politics in Britain. The contributors to the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* often found themselves at odds with the right and center of the Labour Party, but could not ignore the fact that to advocate a separation from Labour entirely, equated to political suicide for any upstart left-leaning organization. In other words, the group's existence depended on its refusal to insist that the New Left and Labour were mutually exclusive organizations. While significant to the New Left's activities, the relationship between the New Left participants and Labour was not the only factor effecting its political successes and failures.

The following chapter details the relationship between the political aspirations and activities of the New Left in Britain and the milieu's intellectual character. As the New Left, exceptions such as Hobsbawm aside, represented a break with the Communism of the Old Left, the CPGB will not play a major part in this analysis. In the aftermath of 1956, CPGB's influence waned, leaving the Labour Party as the remaining political power on the left. As such, this chapter focuses on the New Left's attempts to further socialist politics through its relationship with Labour and the labor movement more generally.



In *The First New Left*, University of Sheffield Professor in political science, Michael Kenny, gave significant space to a discussion of the New Left and the Labour Party.<sup>86</sup> Kenny detailed several New Left opinions of Labour's policies and produced a coherent narrative on the New Left's own difficulty in achieving consensus in regards to these opinions. To avoid redundancy, my focus navigates the holes in Kenny's assessment of the political life of the New Left. What Kenny does not explore, by his own admission, is the role of the intellectual in movements such as the first New Left and how labor movement anti-intellectualism inhibited them.<sup>87</sup>

What follows is an attempt to fill this gap in the historiography. Using analyses of the New Left and Labour, which builds upon Kenny's work, alongside a study of the anti-intellectualism of left politics in Britain, and the unabashedly intellectual nature of the New Left, I argue that the complexity of the New Left's relationship with Labour and the intellectual nature of the movement proved to be insurmountable hurdles for the organization in achieving a unification of intellectuals and laborers.

To support this assertion, the chapter is broken into three sections. The first section outlines the significant factors in the relationship between the New Left and the Labour Party. Invoking the example of the *New Reasoner's* editorial support of the Fife Socialist League against a Labour candidate in the general election of 1959, I

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), 119-67.

<sup>87</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*, 207.

argue that this relationship obstructed the New Left's attempts to influence political change in Britain.

The second portion of the chapter argues that an anti-intellectual labor movement existed during the period in question. To draw this conclusion I engaged various sources on the subject. These include writings by New Left contributors, labor and trade union papers, and historical analyses of working-class print culture and the prevailing notions regarding the intellectual in Britain.

Finally, the focus shifts toward the intellectual nature of the British New Left. It is important to look at the New Left's perception of itself and how intellectualism and anti-intellectualism were dealt with in *New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review*. For example, eighty-two articles published in the *New Reasoner* and seventy-six in the *ULR* specifically address intellectuals and/or anti-intellectualism. It would seem that only Stalinism appeared more frequently in the published conversations of the early New Left. The sheer amount of print space dedicated to the topic indicates its importance to the intellectuals of the New Left, yet the topic of how to marry the intellectual to the larger movement was never properly dealt with. As such, that the New Left remained an intellectual-driven movement remained a large impediment to success. Unresolved debates about the appropriate course for intellectuals to take to influence the labor movement often devolved into defensive rhetoric and reverted to theoretical discussions of socialism. This furthered the divide between the intellectual and the working class and exacerbated the New Left's problem unifying the two groups.

Though the group did achieve some measure of success in stimulating thought amongst the larger political bodies in Britain, it failed to influence major socialist change. This failure boiled down to the inability of New Left intellectuals to break the loyalties the participants in their mood held to Labour, to penetrate the anti-intellectualism of the British labour movement, and to objectively analyze how the New Left's intellectual nature inhibited their influence.

### **New Left and the Labour Party**

Being socialists, the New Left naturally fit best with the far left of the Labour Party. While still maintaining its distinct differences from the mainstream of Labour, the mood and loosely affiliated movement furthered by the New Left contained many members of Labour. As such, it would be impossible to produce a sufficient analysis of the New Left's political life without considering its relationship with the Labour Party. The New Left must not be viewed as a faction within the Party, yet it certainly did not operate in complete independence. In order to further its socialist aims, the group relied significantly on attempting to influence Labour. Ultimately, the delicate relationship between the Party and the New Left proved significant in limiting the New Left's prospects for attaining any tangible political progress.

Coinciding with the close of the Second World War, Great Britain elected its Labour Party to power for the first time.<sup>88</sup> With a majority in the House of Commons, and under the direction of Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee, the

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<sup>88</sup> Labour came to power under minority governments in 1923 and 1929; 1945 was the first outright Labour victory.

Labour Party government undertook the task of creating a welfare state as detailed by Sir William Beveridge in 1942. As stated in the Beveridge Report, the revolutionary time period Britons found themselves in was “a time for revolutions, not for patching.”<sup>89</sup> Designed to be an offensive against the “five giants” standing in the way of this revolution, those being Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness, the welfare state would require the Western nation state to provide for its citizens like never before.<sup>90</sup> Among its several components were nationalized health care, education reforms, social insurance policies, and the nationalization of several industries.

By 1951, the Labour Party lost its grip on Parliament and Britain spent the decade under Conservative leadership. With this transformative era at an end, the left in Britain was seemingly split on how to view the progress made by the Labour government of the late forties. While many undeniably enjoyed the benefits of Labour’s reforms, the far left in Britain remained unsatisfied. Typified by the sentiment of *New Reasoner* co-editor John Saville, many leftists saw the advance toward a welfare state as an adoption of socialist policies in order to placate the working class and push forward Britain’s capitalist ambitions. Saville and others within the New Left felt that the bill for Labour’s successes in advancing socialist ideas fell to the middle and working classes for payment. The cessation of nationalization policies and creation of healthcare charges in the early 1950s

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<sup>89</sup> William Beveridge, "Social Insurance and Allied Services," (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1942).

<sup>90</sup> Beveridge. "Social Insurance and Allied Services."

showed signs of weakness in the system and provided an avenue for New Left critics to deride Labour.

Saville, Thompson, and others among the New Left continually argued for the programs of the welfare state to move forward, yet, in the eyes of several New Left contributors, the Labour Party grew further to the right as the Cold War advanced and affluence took hold in Britain.<sup>91</sup> For example, *New Reasoner* and *ULR* contributors occasionally complained that Keynesian economic models were reconciled with Marxism to justify the relatively minute changes in the capitalist structure of Britain.<sup>92</sup> This movement right left many radicals within the New Left disenchanted with the advancements achieved by Labour in the previous decade. The dilemma facing those who stood opposed to the Labour Party in the 1950s (and beyond) was the hegemony enjoyed by Labour as the “only mass party based on the organized working class in Britain.”<sup>93</sup>

Despite the Labour Party’s supremacy among left politics in Britain, the authors contributing to *New Reasoner* and *ULR* pressed on with their calls for a more radical voice for the left, whether through the Labour Party or not. Among the most insightful pieces on the welfare state was Saville’s article in the Winter 1957 issue of *New Reasoner* entitled, “The Welfare State: An Historical Approach”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> This is especially true under the leadership of Hugh Gaitskill. Gaitskill garnered mention in thirty-three articles within *New Reasoner* and *ULR*, mostly as an enemy of the Labour Left. See also John Saville’s “Note on West Fife” that appeared in *New Reasoner* 9.

<sup>92</sup> Norman Mackenzie, “The Economics of Prosperity,” *ULR* 5 (1958): 62-65.

<sup>93</sup> Lin, *The British New Left*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> John Saville, “The Welfare State: An Historical Approach,” *New Reasoner* 3 (1957): 5-25.

Saville, through a history of socialist movement in Britain, sought to influence the New Left to continue the fights that resulted in the creation of the welfare state. He felt that the welfare state, as it existed in the late 1950s, should not be viewed as the goal achieved, but as a mere step along the way. In attempting to illustrate the work that remained to be done, Saville took issue with the fact that the redistribution of wealth necessary for the welfare state to function had largely come from within the working classes through an increase in indirect forms of taxation. Saville used economic data to argue that the increased taxes on tobacco, alcohol, and consumption of goods meant that the working class footed a larger portion of the bill for social reform than was generally recognized. Rather than a narrowing of the gaps between the classes, such gaps continued to exist. His call was for the Labour Party to reenergize the debate and to come back from its nearly decade long hiatus to the right.<sup>95</sup>

Not to be outdone, the *ULR* dedicated a large portion of its Autumn 1958 issue to a discussion of Britain's welfare state. Among the articles was a particularly interesting work by Ralph Samuel.<sup>96</sup> Samuel reviewed recent literature on the state of socialism in Britain and, in chorus with other writers from the left, began to call for Labour to shift its priorities from defending the welfare state to expanding it. For Samuel, the reorganization of the welfare state must first involve a reorganization of the ideals of British society. In his explanation of this he invokes

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<sup>95</sup> Saville, "The Welfare State," 8.

<sup>96</sup> Ralph Samuel, "New Authoritarianism – New Left," *ULR* 5 (1958): 67-69.

Thompson's socialist humanism:

“The new socialism involves the projection of a Utopian ideal of a society in which labour and culture are once again made personal and significant for each individual, in which the life of the society is shaped not by the pressures of the military, the corporation, the bureaucrat, but by the active agency at every level in society of men themselves working in a community of human brotherhood.”<sup>97</sup>

Though remarkably well written and inspiring, like much of what the New Left produced, Samuel's prescription for a new socialist society contained the “what” but lacked the “how.” It is this transformation of the New Left from a fringe group of radical intellectuals to a legitimate political movement that seemed to remain an illusive goal for some of the group's leaders. On the one hand, the problem related back to the Labour Party itself. Many attendees of the New Left Clubs and subscription holders to the two prominent publications remained, all the while, members of the Labour Party. Despite their tendency to occupy the far left of the Party, and therefore to not necessarily be well served by much of the Party leadership, they persisted in their reluctance to operate outside of Labour. For them, the labour movement and Labour Party were synonymous. This forced the New Left to tread carefully when opposing Labour. Never was this more apparent than during the general election of 1959. The events surrounding Thompson and Saville's support for a non-Labour candidate in the parliamentary constituency of West Fife illustrated the difficulty the New Left faced in any attempted divergence from the Labour Party.

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<sup>97</sup>Ralph Samuel, “New Authoritarianism – New Left,” 69.

## **The Fife Socialist League**

Like the intellectuals of the New Left, Lawrence Daly had become disenchanted with the grip that the Stalinists of the Executive Committee had maintained on the CPGB. As noted in the introductory chapter, even after the events of the Twentieth Congress and Hungary, the Executive Committee remained unwilling to democratize their rule and open the Party to constructive debate about its future. Lawrence Daly, again in accordance with the intellectuals of the New Left, resigned his party membership following the fateful events of 1956. Despite these similarities with the pioneers of the New Left, Daly was different in that he himself was not from the intellectual fringe of the CPGB. He had been a Party member since his teens, and, as an adult, had become an official within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). He was precisely the type of person that the CPGB could not afford to lose. In Daly's home district of Fife, CPGB membership dropped twenty-five percent, due in some part to Daly's influence in the area.<sup>98</sup>

Once out of the CPGB, Daly and his cohorts in eastern Scotland started the Fife Socialist League. Upon their first meeting they adopted a constitution providing for the creation of democratic socialist society. By 1958, the League decided to participate in the local elections by running Daly for councilor in his county of West Fife. Amazingly, Daly soundly defeated both the Labour and CPGB candidates and won the election. With his victory, Daly served his constituents well by holding monthly forums for their input on county affairs.

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<sup>98</sup> Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, 120.



Daly and his men continued to act upon local New Left initiatives through their routine meetings. For example, Saville recalled that Daly and the League were instrumental in organizing protests of the execution of former Hungarian Prime Minister Imre Nagy who was deposed after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. This relationship between the several members of the New Left and the Fife Socialist League would lead to Saville and Thompson's support of Daly in a bid for a seat in Parliament during the general election of 1959.<sup>99</sup>

Despite the support from a faction within the New Left, Daly was unable to defeat the Labour incumbent. Daly did, however, defeat the CPGB candidate, which was significant since the Communist Party had held the seat as recently as 1950. Despite their victory in West Fife, the Conservative Party defeated Labour in total and continued its rule.

Saville and Thompson's decision to come out in support of Daly over the Labour Party's incumbent was not popular with several of their colleagues within the New Left. In defense of their actions Saville wrote the brief "Note on West Fife" that appeared in the tenth and final issue of *New Reasoner* during the autumn of 1959. In it, Saville suggested that their support of the Fife Socialist League as an independent socialist party in opposition to Labour in no way suggested that they were advocating a complete separation from Labour across the country. Rather, Saville and Thompson supported the Fife Socialist League due to the specific circumstances existing in West Fife.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, 120-1.

<sup>100</sup> John Saville, "A Note on West Fife," *New Reasoner* no. 10 (1959): 9-13.

Those circumstances, Saville maintained, did not exist in other areas of Britain and therefore their decision about which candidate to support in West Fife would not have been made (and, in fact, was not made) in any other parliamentary constituency. Saville continued his note to shrewdly point out that just because West Fife's circumstances were unique in this particular election did not mean that other constituencies could not develop similar circumstances in the future. His "Note on West Fife" ended with a possible answer to the question that he and Thompson had asked themselves in deciding whether or not to support the Fife Socialist League:

"[W]e shall have to ask ourselves again the central question: is this an action that will push forward the movement for socialism, or will it result in a setback to our ideas and our ideals? The answer will depend on the circumstances of the time and place and personalities; it will not rest upon a simple assertion that what is not favoured by the Labour Party organization is in itself wrong for socialists and the socialist movement. With a Labour Party organization dominated by Mr. Gaitskell and a world dominated by nuclear weapons, no socialist can give that answer."<sup>101</sup>

Therefore, West Fife did prove an example of how socialist humanism could employ principles of democratic socialism if they were deemed effective. They were a group of their own making who sought to achieve influence through governmental channels. While socialist humanism did not dictate that politics-as-usual is always the means for change, it did not write it off.

Saville's spirited response came as a result of the division among New Left intellectuals about the group's relationship to the major voice of the left in British politics. As chroniclers of New Left history have pointed out, the question of

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<sup>101</sup> Saville, "A Note on West Fife," 13.

whether the New Left should exist within or outside of the Labour Party would remain throughout the group's existence.<sup>102</sup> In the case of the Fife Socialist League, Thompson and Saville had been in the minority on the editorial board of their own journal, which resulted in Thompson and Saville being able to offer Daly an endorsement only from themselves and not from the *New Reasoner* as a whole.<sup>103</sup>

Unfortunately for those within the New Left, the conflict over Saville and Thompson's support of the Fife Socialist League in the general election of 1959 would not, by any stretch of the imagination, be the only instance of disagreement among the strong personalities within the movement. Equally contentious would be the proposed next step in the New Left's trajectory toward becoming a more potent voice for British socialism, the merger of *New Reasoner* with *ULR*. While these disagreements are important, the underlying reasons relate back to the pressures of being an intellectual movement in a climate of anti-intellectualism. The following section addresses these concerns and reinforces the idea that the New Left's failure to influence political change cannot be fully understood without considering the difficulty in connecting the intellectual-driven New Left with the working people of Britain.

Anti-intellectualism within the British labor movement provided one factor in my assertion that the intellectual nature of the New Left presented an insurmountable hurdle. The following section details this anti-intellectualism. To best address this, I present the works of two contemporary scholars on the role of

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<sup>102</sup> Kenny, *The First New Left*; Chun, *The British New Left*.

<sup>103</sup> Saville, "A Note on West Fife," 9.

the intellectual in Britain and the print culture of Britain's working class. Alongside these, an essay by Thompson also takes up concerns about anti-intellectualism.

### **Anti-Intellectualism and the British Labour Movement**

When discussing the role of the New Left in shaping socialist thought in Britain, more general questions about the roles of intellectuals in British society inevitably arise. In order to understand the potential role of an intellectual in Britain, a look at three important works on the subject is needed.

Most basic to the discussion is the question of whether there was such an entity as a class of intellectuals in Britain to begin with. The self-deprecating notion of an intellectual gulf in Britain is a common theme in such discussions. Recently, intellectual historian Stefan Collini wrote in contradiction to such notions in his book *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*.<sup>104</sup> Collini dissected the "question of the intellectual".<sup>105</sup> In defining the term, Collini continually refers to the intellectual as someone with a specialist's knowledge in a given field while simultaneously appealing to more general topics and audiences, and that such an intellectual exists among both British right and left.<sup>106</sup>

When discussing the role of intellectuals in British politics, Collini's arguments bear a resemblance to the notions upon which the first New Left attempted to build. Through their works within the New Left and their efforts to attract working peoples into their discussions, they fulfilled Collini's definition of

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<sup>104</sup> Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>105</sup> Collini, *Absent Minds*, 1-15.

<sup>106</sup> Collini, *Absent Minds*, 57-59.

the intellectual engaging general audiences. Unfortunately, it is not only an effort to engage that is necessary. Also needed is the ability to successfully engage a receptive working class.

One important aspect of the intellectual question not addressed by Collini were the consequences of anti-intellectualism in Britain. Collini spent a portion of his book analyzing various intellectuals, which provided the perfect context for tackling anti-intellectualism. Among his analyses, Collini expressed the paradox of British intellectuals questioning the existence of an intellectual Briton. To connect Collini's observations to my own, one must extend this paradox. If the intellectuals themselves question the validity of a British intelligentsia of any demonstrable capability, then where would that leave the working class left in their acceptance of an intellectual-driven wing of their movement? The fact that Britain's absent intellectual was indeed myth has little bearing on the very real sentiments it rendered in the minds of those whom the New Left attempted to reach. This was all the more pronounced by the time that the New Left attempted to create space for itself within the British Left.

To explain this, one must again turn to Thompson. In an essay entitled *Outside the Whale*, Thompson does not solely focus on anti-intellectualism, but it is one of many themes.<sup>107</sup> The essay first appeared in *Out of Apathy*, a volume of essays edited by Thompson, Ralph Samuel, Stuart Hall, Alasdair MacIntyre, Peter Worsley, and Ken Alexander.<sup>108</sup> Thompson used the essay to critique the

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<sup>107</sup> E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," *Out of Apathy* (London: Stephens, 1960).

<sup>108</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, (London: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 211-43.

entrenched Cold War dichotomy that seemed to have enveloped those on both sides of the iron curtain. His title, not coincidentally, plays off of that of George Orwell's 1940 essay, *Inside the Whale*.

Thompson viewed Orwell and others as guilty of espousing a "Natopolitan ideology", which Thompson defined as a viewpoint resigning one to the fact that there is nothing for one to do but assume a position of passivity in relation to Cold War political circumstances. In other words, a Natopolitan was someone who ceased to question, to speak out, and to search for another way, and instead apathetically accepted the continuance of the status quo within the western sphere of the Cold War.<sup>109</sup> Within the essay Thompson harshly, and perhaps unfairly, criticized Orwell and others of the intellectual Left for their acquiescence. Despite beginning by questioning the resilience of the intellectual Left in the dealing with the horrors of Soviet Communism, the article went on to elaborate on how Natopolitanism engulfed nearly everyone. It is here that the culture of anti-intellectualism (in so far as it stood in contradiction to Natopolitan ideology) profoundly affected the efforts of the first New Left. Indeed this could also be a point in arguing for the significance of the voices on the New Left in that they refused to concede to the Natopolitan ideology.

Within the Natopolitan ideology existed other sources and products of the apathetic society of 1950s Britain. A youth disenchanted with political action had come of age in a "most materialist of civilizations, characterized by conspicuous

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<sup>109</sup> Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 213.

consumption within and nuclear power strategy without.”<sup>110</sup> It was this lack of youth interest in political matters and the comfort of post-war affluence that made difficult the prospect of garnering support for the first New Left’s socialist agenda.

Thompson insisted that the Natopolitan ideology developed, in part, out of the apathy of intellectuals in the face of Stalinist atrocities. Rather than reclaiming socialism from the totalitarian heap, they instead abandoned morality and reason and accepted the defeat of the ideals to which they had so passionately clung. This absence of moralism seemed to strike Thompson most deeply, and he posited that the peace movement and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament provided the only effective resistance to the Natopolitan ideology. It is there that hope remained, and it is also there that Thompson would eventually come to devote much of his attention.

So, as Thompson and, as we’ll see in the following section, others within the New Left realized, it was their lot to cultivate socialist change in an environment apathetic to such changes. In addition to Thompson’s theoretical recognition of this fact, studies on working class print culture, such as *The Intellectual Lives of the British Working Classes* by Professor Jonathan Rose corroborate such assertions. Rose engaged his topic by carving his work into chapters. Most relevant is Rose’s “downbeat ending.”<sup>111</sup>

The “downbeat ending” to Rose’s work, arrived at another hypothesis leading to the end of a textually engaged working class, which did not rest on Thompson’s

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<sup>110</sup> Thompson, “Outside the Whale,” 220.

<sup>111</sup> Jonathan Rose, *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 11.

notions of apathy as the basis for anti-intellectualism. Rose's analysis suggested that the working-class autodidact existed in a literary world a generation behind the current. As such, it became difficult to engage working peoples in contemporary literary and cultural debates. Eventually the hostility of modernist writers in the middle of the twentieth century toward the working-class reader would spell the end for the thriving autodidact. In the end these modernists would seek to conduct their work in a way that reinforced class distinctions and excluded working-class readers. The New Left could be seen in this light, as the working-class reader would most likely not find much within the pages of the New Left's publications that peaked his interest. The widening gulf between the middle-class radical left and the working class served as further detriment to New Left ambitions.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the differences in Rose's and Thompson's assessments, the resultant observations of an anti-intellectualism existent in the culture of Cold War Britain signaled a difficult road ahead for the socialist humanists of the first New Left. Though many editorials pushed for turning theory into practice, the New Left remained keenly aware of its condition as a movement of intellectuals and the problems that this presented. What the New Left failed to do was act on this awareness in a way to bridge the gap between themselves and Britain's workers and youth in any meaningful way. Instead, discussions of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, like many arguments within the New Left's publications, never provided a constructive way forward. While the New Left's character as a mood could be seen as a strength, it hindered any real attempt at political action. The

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<sup>112</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 462-64.



theoretical, defensive nature that characterized many New Left discussions of the role of intellectuals in the labor movement seemed equally as detrimental to New Left ambitions as did the existence of an anti-intellectual working class.

### **The Intellectual Nature of the British New Left**

It goes without saying that the contributors to the New Left were intent on impacting the life of the British worker. That being said, however, very few of the contributors to the New Left's publications were workers themselves. The movement began and remained a movement in which intellectuals performed most of the leadership functions. Two historians from Yorkshire universities, Thompson and Saville, led the *New Reasoner* contingent, while the *ULR* remained in the charge of its young, Oxford-bred founders. For the entirety of their runs, the publications failed to publish anything written by a rank and file trade unionist or wage laborer.

The rare occasion of an article written by a trade union leader provided the journals' only glimpses into the non-academic arm of the labor movement. Though that was not universally true, as some of the trade union leaders were as removed from their constituents as the academics themselves. For example, *ULR's* third issue contains a reprinted pamphlet entitled, *The Insiders*.<sup>113</sup> The pamphlet contained rebuttals to the Labor Party's ideas on nationalization, which included a contribution by Clive Jenkins. Jenkins, the deputy secretary of a white-collar trade union, hardly struck the image of a self-advocating member of the working class. While he, like the intellectuals of the New Left, sought a socialist Britain, his swift

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<sup>113</sup> Stuart Hall, ed. "The Insiders," *ULR* 3 (Winter 1958): 24-64.

rise through his union's ranks left him detached.<sup>114</sup> Upon his death, the *Independent* remembered him as the "original millionaire 'champagne socialist'."<sup>115</sup>

While the failure to elicit contributions from the working peoples they sought to struggle alongside may seem of surface importance, it indeed gets to the crux of the struggle the New Left faced. Not only did they find themselves at odds with conservatism, non-socialists, and even the leadership of the labor movement, but they also faced an important challenge in marrying intellectuals and working peoples in a common goal. What I intend to focus on presently is the New Left's awareness and perception of this in relation to its perception of itself as an intellectual movement. In doing so, it should remain clear that the New Left's struggle to permeate the larger movement with its emerging mood was constantly undermined, not only by anti-intellectualism, but also by the New Left's responses to anti-intellectualism and their inability to loosen the intellectual structure of their publications. As Rose pointed to above, the working class showed little interest in the theoretical musings of middle-class intellectuals. Despite recognizing this, the New Left's publications never strayed far from overtly intellectual content.

The initial editorials of both the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* stated the New Left's desire to do two things.<sup>116</sup> Firstly, Stalinism's shadow left the socialist intellectuals of Britain with many questions. It would be the task of these journals to

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<sup>114</sup> By the age of thirty-two, Jenkins had already risen to become a National Officer for the Association of Supervisory Staffs, Executives, and Technicians (ASSET); by thirty-five becoming the General Secretary.

<sup>115</sup> Terry Pattinson, "Obituary: Clive Jenkins", *Independent*, September 23, 1999, accessed August 26, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-clive-jenkins-1121173.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Stuart Hall, "Editorial," *ULR* 1 (1957); John Saville and E.P. Thompson, "Editorial," *New Reasoner* 1 (1957).

reinvigorate the socialist thinker with a return to a more humanistic socialism. The journals became an avenue to delve into the nature of socialism in the Cold War climate of the ever-changing welfare state and the cessation of years of erosive Stalinist rhetoric. Had Stalinism been a logical outcome of socialist thought, or a perversion? If it was a perversion, as the New Left argued, then what conditions needed to exist for socialism to be successful without devolving into bureaucratic subjugation of working peoples? At the same time, the New Left wrestled with ideological questions about the development of the welfare state in Britain. Had the socialist visions of previous generations been achieved, or was this too a perversion of original intentions born out of postwar affluence and an apathetic populace? In short, the first task the New Left faced was a chiefly intellectual task. In breaking with the established parties of the left they offered an alternative set of ideas that, in the eyes of the New Left's intellectuals, answered the questions above and provided a way forward for socialism in Britain.

The second objective outlined in the two opening editorials involved the aforementioned desire to unite the intellectual and laboring wings of the British left. Being scholars of labor, social, political, and economic history, the founders of the journals remained keenly aware of the disconnect between these two groups. Unfortunately, such awareness did not provide any easier path toward reconciling the needs and preconceptions of the workers with the ideological aims and preconceptions of the intellectuals. That the New Left's publications spent significantly more space addressing the first editorial goal at the cost of the second furthered the problem. While they were hashing out a theoretical way forward for

socialism in the wake of Stalinism, the working people of Britain remained wholly apart from the New Left. Even when the idea of intellectuals and working people combining forces in a socialist push did come about, it almost always devolved into a discussion about the intellectual with little mention of the working person.

In order to confront ideas about the role of intellectuals in the making of a socialist movement, the New Left turned to the work of Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Documents from Gramsci on the role of the intellectual and education within a socialist society revealed a basis in socialist philosophy for the role of the intellectual put forth by the New Left.<sup>117</sup> Though, the New Left did not sufficiently analyze their own actions and efforts alongside Gramsci's notions.

The first time Gramsci appeared in *New Reasoner* came in an article by Christopher Hill. Hill engaged Gramsci's thoughts by selecting quotations from Gramsci and then providing his own analysis of these selections. Hill seemed to recognize Gramsci's call for intellectuals in socialist society to concern themselves with engaging the working class. As that was one of the goals listed in New Left editorials, it is not surprising to see this included. What is surprising to see is the lack of analysis by Hill into what Gramsci actually meant and how the New Left was or was not upholding the Gramscian ideals.

Gramsci insisted that every person is an intellectual to some degree and that working people should develop within their own ranks, "organic" intellectuals. In addition, the traditional intellectual must be recruited to the cause of the worker. The majority of intellectuals in the New Left would fall into the traditional

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<sup>117</sup> Hill, Christopher, "Antonio Gramsci," *New Reasoner* 4 (1958): 107-13.

archetype, and obviously concerned themselves with the cause of the worker. What was perhaps unknown to them was how to best engage the working class. Indeed Gramsci called on the intelligentsia to inject themselves into the working class physically and emotionally, not just intellectually. In other words, the intellectual should not just be a commenter in the movement but an active and invested co-contributor to any struggle for socialist change. It is here that the Gramscian prescriptions for making socialists and the work of the New Left diverge. While the New Left certainly attempted to engage intellectually with the worker, they left the more difficult physical and emotional engagement lacking.

There were efforts by some among the New Left, such as Thompson and Raymond Williams, to engage in the Workers Education Association. Though, the internal shortcomings and bureaucratization of this organization made it less concerned with educating the mass of working people and led Williams to eventually take up a position as a lecturer at Cambridge instead of continuing his work as a tutor.<sup>118</sup> The clubs that sprung up around Britain and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) also provided an outlet for New Left intellectuals to forge a connection with working peoples. However, the question remains why these things did not receive more attention in the journals. Aside from the brief editorials and letters to the readers, the New Left's publications failed to undertake much of Gramsci's prescription for creating an actual socialist movement and remained largely concerned with political and cultural theory.

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<sup>118</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: Verso, 1981), 80-81.

Perhaps fault for this lay with the New Left's lack of form. The journals contained works by a myriad of leftist scholars who by no means should be assumed to share in all of the same political actions of their fellow contributors. If the publications advocated too many editor-driven calls for action, the entire character of the journals, as well as the "mood", would have shifted. In fact, Raymond Williams would later recall that the clubs and political activism in general did not seem to be of nearly as much importance to many within the New Left as the continuation of the journal.<sup>119</sup> That being the case, the failure of the intellectuals of the New Left to fully link with the working class cannot even mostly be blamed on an anti-intellectual labor movement. Some of the blame must fall with the New Left for failing to understand how to best engage the working class and not being sufficiently concerned with Gramsci's recommendations for action.

The New Left may not have been unified in their methods for reform, but there were considerable musings on the topic in the publications. The largest piece in the first issue of *New Reasoner*, Thompson's "Socialist Humanism", addressed anti-intellectualism and the role of the intellectual in socialist society by illustrating Stalinist tendencies toward intellectuals as the antithesis of his notion of socialist humanism.<sup>120</sup> Listed chiefly among the characteristics of Stalinism, anti-intellectualism became a primary feeding source for the growth of dogmatism. Thompson painted anti-intellectualism as an affront to the notion of human agency, and the New Left as a way to combat such irrationality. By repeatedly marrying the failures and horrors of Stalinism with its root anti-intellectual tendencies,

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<sup>119</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 80-81.

<sup>120</sup> E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," *New Reasoner* 1 (1957): 105-43.

Thompson addressed both aims of the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* editorials. He asserted the relevance socialism still held, writing off Stalinism as an outcome of an irrational dogmatism to be combated with an injection of reason and humanism. In addition, he set the table for a reunification of intellectual and laboring socialists as being a chief component of an anti-Stalinist form of socialism.

In addition to Thompson's article, both journals included numerous other pieces that, at least partially, dedicated themselves to addressing the role of intellectuals in socialist society. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, nearly 160 articles across both journals addressed intellectuals and/or anti-intellectualism. This pointed to the importance of the topics for New Left contributors, but the dedication of space to these issues did not correlate to an increased understanding of how to effectively engage the working class. Despite this outcome, it remains important to see how the contributors addressed the role of the intellectual.

Several issues of the *ULR* provided significant space to the conversation surrounding a Fabian pamphlet by English novelist Kingsley Amis. Though once a member of the CPGB, Amis's political sentiments moved further to the right during the late 1950s and into the 1960s.<sup>121</sup> This became quite apparent in the pamphlet, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, as Amis wrote on the reluctance of intellectuals to dive into the labor movement.<sup>122</sup> In short, Amis opined that the intellectual possessed little desire, or in fact reason for desire, to truly engage in the labor movement. This he does not view as a problem, for he remained insistent that an

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<sup>121</sup> Zachary Leader, "Amis, Sir Kingsley William (1922–1995)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/60221>, accessed 29 Nov 2011

<sup>122</sup> Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, Fabian Tract 304, January 1957.

intellectual's contributions to any movement bordered on negligibility.<sup>123</sup>

Obviously, Amis's ideas met opposition from the intellectuals of the New Left. One best gets a sense of the New Left's opinion on these matters from the articles and discussion evolving from the Amis pamphlet. The articles provided a glimpse into underlying perceptions about the New Left's own intellectual identity.

The first response to Amis came from EP Thompson and appeared in the first issue of *ULR*.<sup>124</sup> Thompson took the opportunity to chastise Amis, rebut Amis's assertions, and promote a reinvigorated socialist humanism as the answer to bringing intellectuals into the labor movement. Thompson viewed Amis's work with much scorn, disagreeing at nearly every point. To Thompson, Amis's apathetic approach to involving himself in the labor movement lacked an understanding of what makes an intellectual. In addressing Amis's assertion that humans operate on involuntary impulses such as guilt or self-interest, we see the root of Thompson's own feelings on intellectualism. Thompson regarded the intellectual as someone who, seemingly above all, believed that ideas actually mattered. Ever the champion of the agency of the individual, Thompson viewed that "it is man's business, if he is not to be the mere victim of involuntary reflexes or of a predetermined historical flux, to strive to understand himself and his times and to make reasonable and right choices. This gives to all our imaginative work a significance at once terrible and hopeful."<sup>125</sup> Believing this to be true, Thompson connected this view of the intellectual as a promoter of individual empowerment to his prescription for a

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<sup>123</sup> Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, 12-13.

<sup>124</sup> E.P. Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," *Universities & Left Review* 1 (1957): 31-36.

<sup>125</sup> Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," 33.



return to socialist humanism. In doing so, Thompson's article moved past Amis and on to the general perception of the intellectual rendered impotent by labor movement bureaucracy. It is here where Thompson saw the need for the intellectual to remain outside of the structured parties in order to successfully reforge a bond with working classes. From this position, intellectuals could promote a moral and reasoned mood capable of circumventing the bureaucratic tendencies of the established parties of the left in Britain. However, Thompson never identified specifically how he envisioned the socialist intellectual would become directly involved with this circumvention.

Thompson's opinion in *Socialism and the Intellectuals* elicited several responses in the second issue of *ULR*. These responses took the form of articles by Mervyn Jones, Harold Silver, Charles Taylor, and Rodney Hilton.<sup>126</sup> Each addressed both Amis's pamphlet and Thompson's reaction. They all seemed to agree with most of Thompson's assertions about Amis, but where they disagreed proved most pertinent to the problems plaguing the New Left's attempt to influence the labor movement. Whereas Thompson listed as critical the intellectual's ability to move fluidly through the movement and outside the established parties, these men disagreed. Mervyn Jones and Rodney Hilton, in particular, cast aside the notion that intellectuals should abandon the Labour Party in favor of such fluidity.

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<sup>126</sup> Rodney Hilton, "Socialism and the Intellectuals: Four," *Universities & Left Review* 2 (Summer 1957): 19-20; Mervyn Jones, "Socialism and the Intellectuals: One," *Universities & Left Review* 2 (Summer 1957): 15-17; Harold Silver, "Socialism and the Intellectuals: Two," *Universities & Left Review* 2 (Summer 1957): 17-18; Charles Taylor, "Socialism and the Intellectuals: Three," *Universities & Left Review* 2 (Summer 1957): 18-19.

This disagreement, similar to the situation surrounding the Fife Socialist League, proved to be a critical stumbling block for any potential political successes. While some of the New Left's most influential members promoted operating from within the fluidity of a mood, there remained several other contributors loyal to established political practice.

Another point of contention, raised by Silver and Taylor, related back to the gulf between intellectuals and working people. Silver viewed the division as a major roadblock to success, but his article, interestingly, maintained a defensive tone.<sup>127</sup> Whereas much of the content glorified the workingman, Silver seemed more than ready to lay the responsibility for lack of intellectual-worker cooperation at the feet of the laborers. While not entirely prevalent among the printed material, perhaps this mindset that the worker should seek the intellectual as much as the intellectual seeks out the worker was not an uncommon view.

Taylor was another who seemed to agree on principal with Thompson about Amis's piece, but did not extend this agreement to Thompson's proposed solutions.<sup>128</sup> It is clear that Taylor felt that Thompson put the cart before the horse. Before intellectuals began a process of pushing an advance of socialist or Communist ideologies, Taylor felt they should address the theoretical problems within their own milieu. Taylor implied that Thompson wrote off Stalinism too quickly as a perversion of otherwise humanistic ideologies. He argued that before intellectuals of the left began working for real political change, these situations required sorting. One such situation was the perception that Stalinism and the

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<sup>127</sup> Silver, Harold "Socialism and the Intellectuals: Two," 17-18.

<sup>128</sup> Taylor, Charles "Socialism and the Intellectuals: Three," 18-19.

climate of Cold War Britain had so muddled the theoretical foundation of leftist organizations that they had sealed off any potential way forward.

Thompson produced a rebuttal to the responses by Jones, Silver, Taylor, and Hilton that echoed his earlier sentiments and scratched the surface of his own views on the unification of intellectual and working class efforts. He reiterated that the intellectual must not pretend that influence can be won by operating as a faction within the Labour Party. To Thompson, the bureaucratization of the labor movement blocked avenues between the workers and the intellectuals that had existed since the nineteenth century. Only intellectual involvement in educational and cultural activities associated with a broader socialist movement, not specifically tied to Labour or a particular trade union, could rebuild these connections. Thompson never expanded his argument to include specific examples for what needed to be done, and his ideas remained a vaguely stated call to action. Instead, he turned to Taylor's criticisms about his use of Stalinism as a scapegoat for larger problems within socialist theory. In doing so, the conversation returned to Thompson's repeated insistence that the socialism of Mann and Morris provided the answer to whatever ailed the far left in the 1950s.<sup>129</sup> Though Thompson wrote off Taylor's criticisms in his rebuttal, theoretical maneuvering remained a central part of the journals going forward. While they spent much time and paper addressing theory, focus never seemed to center on re-forging the bonds between the workers and the intellectuals, which was so convincingly discussed in editorials and open letters to readers.

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<sup>129</sup> Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals: A Reply," *Universities & Left Review* 2 (Summer 1957): 22.

The New Left's publications, crowded with articles from lecturers and readers from various universities, seemed perpetually linked to the socialist thinker rather than the socialist worker. While the editorials intimated the editors' desire to re-forge the bonds between workers and intellectuals, the articles often projected the opposite. The above assessment of the intellectual nature of the New Left becomes all the more relevant when one considers the aforementioned perception of intellectuals within British society, the intellectual tendencies of the working peoples of Britain, and the relationship between the New Left and the Labour Party.

It must be recognized that throughout their discussions, the intellectuals of the New Left never addressed the reality of the situation. In order for them to slowly break through these roadblocks to intellectual involvement in the labor movement they needed to attempt to engage the working class. Instead, the *New Reasoner* and the *ULR* remained highly intellectual publications. The density of their writing and the theoretical nature of their analyses of politics and culture provided little that would appeal to the working class autodidact, as described by Rose. The New Left never found a way to marry the intellectual with the bulk of the labor movement. The argument could be made that it eventually stopped pretending to try to do so. In 1960 the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* merged into the *New Left Review* and, shortly thereafter, the first New Left gave way to the second. As argued in the next chapter, this second New Left in Britain developed a greater concern with theoretical discussions and the notion of reconnecting with the larger labor movement began to seem more and more irrelevant.

## Chapter 4

The New Left's form as a "mood" undoubtedly provided several benefits. It allowed for dissenting opinions to be considered and debated. Its flexibility enabled it to exist in various locales throughout Britain, despite the differing circumstances within each place. In many senses it was the logical way forward for socialism, considering the bureaucratic nature of the other established options for Left politics in Britain. On the surface, the mood provided the New Left with the appearance of a diverse movement. Differences surfaced in debates over issues of politics and economics. The debates, or "discussions", in the pages of *New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review (ULR)* covered topics such as socialist wage plans and the various doings of the Labour Party. The most intense debates were theoretical arguments over a way forward for socialism. The New Left's tendency to focus much of their publication space on hashing out the notion of socialist humanism, for example, gave the appearance of a diverse movement, and yet there was a diversity of opinion on nearly every issue. However, a larger view shows that such differences were not as much a testament to the diversity of the movement, as they were of its uniformity as a movement among intellectuals.

This chapter explores the people behind the New Left's main voice, the journals. A statistical look at the contributors to the First New Left provides a microcosm of the problem of the New Left's mood: the surface diversity belied its homogeneity. In other words, the large number of contributors and the fervent differences in opinion should not be mistaken as evidence of a diverse socialist

movement. Though the opinions they held varied, the main voice of the New Left came from its foundation of intellectual writers.

The chapter is split into two main sections. These sections use traditional analysis of New Left writing to draw conclusions, but they also utilize statistical data. First, I present the New Left's contributors by the numbers. By compiling and organizing author data, many conclusions about the New Left can be quickly verified or denied. The New Left published a very large number of writers, almost two hundred individual authors. The fact that the overwhelming majority of these were academics confirms earlier assertions that overtly academic content bogged down the progress of the New Left as a popular movement. Additionally, the New Left's scholars may have differed in opinions and been large in number, but simple demographic information confirmed that pinpointing the New Left's typical contributor to be a simple task.

Secondly, the chapter uses similar comparisons of author data to answer a fundamental question about the New Left; was there really a First and Second New Left in Britain? The historiography is muddled on this topic. Some scholars such as Michael Kenny suggest that there were two New Lefts. However, there tends to be some disagreement about whether the New Left experienced a gradual shift from First to Second, or if there was in fact a distinct breaking point between each wave of the New Left in Britain. After the *New Reasoner* merged with *ULR* to create the *New Left Review (NLR)*, the new journal underwent an editorial shift. This editorial shift not only marked a change in the journal's leadership, but largely signaled an end to First New Left involvement in the New Left's primary forum, its journal. This

break between the First and Second New Left is also illustrated by the changes to the journals goals and the abandonment of the New Left Clubs.

This chapter quantifies the New Left's overtly scholarly make up through a simple look at who was contributing to the journals. I compiled a list of contributors and sorted them based on occupation, universities taught at or attended, nationality, journal(s) contributed to, and involvement in Workers' Education or other movements. This showed that the New Left's publications can best be characterized as by and for intellectuals. Despite their intent to stir a mood, they were unable to put aside theoretical debate in the interest of garnering popular support.

This inability to move away from discussions of theory only intensified with the shift to the Second New Left in Britain. Whereas the First New Left at least made popular support a goal, the Second New Left retreated further into theoretical debates and dropped the pretense of developing a mood for socialist change. The Second New Left represents a much sharper break from the first than is often implied in the historiography. This is best quantified by comparing the lack of carryover between contributors to the First New Left and those of the Second, and also by comparing the focus of the *New Left Review* before and after the shift from First to Second New Left.

### **The Contributors to the First New Left:**

While the First New Left in Britain did not bring sweeping socialist change to the nation, it did provide theoretical advancement of socialist ideals in the wake of Stalinism's destructive effects. In addition, the New Left became a forum for great

writers and thinkers to express their ideas. Though there have not been a large number of books written about the New Left as a whole, there are a fair number of biographies written about New Left contributors. Inevitably, the easiest way to view the New Left is through its most recognizable names. However, one problem with this is that the New Left as a movement or “mood” becomes overshadowed by names such as E.P. Thompson.

Without doubt, Thompson cuts the most interesting of figures among the New Left. His ability to express his opinion and eviscerate his intellectual opponents inspires curiosity. Combine this with the fact that he was a prolific historian and a pioneer of social history, and he becomes an iconic figure among intellectuals. Thompson’s life is commemorated in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and in several biographies written after his death in 1993. Including these biographies, Thompson appeared in the title of over a dozen books and countless articles, theses, and dissertations. This, in part, is owed to Thompson’s status as a public intellectual and a captivating polemicist. He regularly involved himself in marches, protests, and public speeches, particularly related to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It is safe to say that EP Thompson was an intellectual celebrity. But what does this tell us about the New Left? Unfortunately, the New Left has often been an avenue to learn more about EP Thompson and other individuals, while works that analyze the group as a whole are fewer and farther between. Even those works that intend to give a sense of the movement as a whole eventually devolve into a retelling of the political thought of several, for lack of a better term, heroes of the New Left.



If quantified, however, a study of the New Left's most prominent figures begins to make more sense. After all, it was these men, as almost all contributors to the first New Left were male, that dominated the pages of the *New Reasoner* and *ULR*. All subsequent notoriety and accomplishments aside, there were a targeted few who took the reigns of the fledgling movement.

Among such "heroes" of the First New Left would be Thompson, John Saville, Raymond Williams, Charles Taylor, Michael Barratt-Brown, Ralph Miliband, Ralph Samuel, and Stuart Hall. Each of these men were invaluable contributors to the New Left, and any study of the group needs to include them. They worked tirelessly, and largely uncompensated, in furthering the journals that provided the voice for an alternative socialist movement. Their importance manifested itself through the sheer number of articles that they published in the journals of the early New Left. Not including their editorial contributions, each of them wrote at least five articles that appeared in either *New Reasoner* or *ULR*. In addition to these eight men, six more writers contributed five or more articles.<sup>130</sup> These most active contributors only made up seven percent of the total number of authors, but were responsible for approximately twenty-seven percent of all single-author pieces in the journals. Among this group, the most prolific writers were Hall and Thompson.

All told, the two journals published roughly 343 single-authored pieces within their combined seventeen issues. Out of these, Hall and Thompson contributed twelve and ten respectively. When these individual works combined with their coauthored articles, editorials, and letters to readers, the total

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<sup>130</sup> These contributors were Mervyn Jones, Malcolm MacEwen, Alisdair MacIntyre, Ronald Meek, John Rex, and Peter Worsley.

contributions was around thirty articles per scholar.<sup>131</sup> Thompson alone, for example, was at least partly responsible for nearly eight percent of the total works that appeared in New Left journals. As one familiar with Thompson's work could assume, his contributions often stirred up spirited debate. His piece entitled "Socialist Humanism" in the first issue of *New Reasoner*, for instance, continued to be written about by others through the next several issues of the journal. Thus, the scope of Thompson's, or Hall's for that matter, influence on the published material of the First New Left went even beyond his comparatively large contribution of material.

The influence these men held on the content of the journals is even more apparent when one considers that they usually published in the journals they edited. The majority of Hall's writings appeared in the *ULR* where he was, at least partially, responsible for over sixteen percent of the journal's content.<sup>132</sup>

With such a large footprint on the New Left's publications, the easiest way to understand the political ideology of the milieu is through these works of its most productive intellectuals. However, a more accurate way to understand the New Left as a movement, or mood as it were, is to look at the dozens of less frequent contributors.

The New Left's two founding publications contained work by nearly two hundred contributors.<sup>133</sup> Roughly sixty-five percent of these contributors provided

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<sup>131</sup> When co-authored works are included, the total jumps to 343 to 384 pieces.

<sup>132</sup> Hall was credited with twenty-nine *ULR* articles out of a total of 177. As a point of comparison, consider that the average *ULR* contributor appeared only 1.8 times.

<sup>133</sup> Actually pinpointing each and every contributor proved somewhat difficult. Several pieces appeared that were not attributed to anyone.

only a single article. While on the surface this might speak to the group's ability to bring in multiple voices on the topics discussed within the journals, it belies the true pulse of the publications. While it is true that individuals publishing a single article made up sixty-five percent of the total contributors, their influence was not quite as big as one would think. These authors only accounted for about one-third of the journals' content. In all, roughly one-third of the writers provided over two-thirds of the material. The contributions of the single-article authors are even less integral to the focus of the journal when one considers that many of their contributions were shorter letters, book reviews, or responses to the larger pieces by more prominent figures in the New Left.

The single-article contributors did tend to include more non-academics. However, even those who were from other walks of life were not mill workers or trade union leaders as often as they were journalists, filmmakers, politicians, and artists. For example, only three of the single-article contributors were trade union workers and/or leaders.<sup>134</sup> This, once again, shows a disconnect between the main voice of a potential socialist movement and the segment of society that would have to be the main players in any such movement.

Approximately thirty-five percent of the contributors published multiple articles. They shared much in common and provided a snapshot of who made up the New Left. First of all, nearly four out of five of these multi-article contributors (male or female) were academics. Nearly every page came from professors, lecturers, readers, or graduate students of some sort. Most of them were historians,

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<sup>134</sup> These would be Eric Heffer, Alan Pickard, and Peter Smith.

economists, or sociologists, with several from Oxford Philosophy, Politics and Economics frequently popping up as well. Those who published multiple articles in New Left publications were overwhelmingly likely to be male scholars based in either the London/Oxford area of southeastern England or to the north in Yorkshire. In fact, only three women provided more than a single article.<sup>135</sup> Of academics contributing more than a single article to the journals of the New Left, forty-five percent were writing from a position in Oxford or one of the many institutions in London. Approximately twenty-seven percent of multi-article contributors wrote from positions in the Yorkshire institutions of Leeds, Hull, or Sheffield. The remainder of academic contributors came from a smattering of other universities. These included Birmingham, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, and the rare Australian, American, or Canadian institution.

The statistics paint a different picture for each journal. Only eleven percent of the writers appeared in both the *New Reasoner* and *ULR*. Therefore, many contributors wrote exclusively in one of the two journals of the New Left. The data on authors shows that the average *New Reasoner* contributor was slightly older, more likely to be a historian, and had some affiliation with universities outside of London, mainly the aforementioned institutions in Yorkshire. Meanwhile, a typical *ULR* contributor was still affiliated with universities in Oxford and London, younger, and likely to come from other academic areas besides history. Not surprising, perhaps, is the geographical or generational divide between the journals. After all, the contributors tended to be around the same age and from the same area as the

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<sup>135</sup> These would be Dorothy Thompson with three articles, and Doris Lessing and Dora Scarlett with two each.

men in charge of publishing the journal. Also, the board at the *New Reasoner* largely consisted of historians, while the *ULR* maintained more departmental diversity with sociologists and scholars of cultural studies at the helm.

The non-academic contributors to the journals tended to be from some type of creative arts field. The *New Reasoner's* typical artistic contributor would be a poet or novelist. In addition, drawings would be reprinted in the pages of the journal as well. Often, the poetry, art, stories, and songs within *New Reasoner* tended to be nostalgic. Just as the socialist humanism of Thompson sought a return to pre-Soviet ideals about socialism in Britain, the arts within the journal harkened back to nineteenth-century socialist movements.<sup>136</sup> In contrast, the younger *ULR* incorporated far more references and studies of popular and youth culture in the non-academic portions of their journals. Instead of reprinting the art and poetry of earlier movements, contemporary writers and filmmakers provided much of the arts content in *ULR*.<sup>137</sup>

While these differences existed, the overwhelmingly academic nature of the journals cannot be overshadowed. The journal appeared to be by academics for academics. If the "mood" permeated through any segment of British society it was the segment nearest to the universities and colleges. A study of the contributors of the New Left confirms scholars' tendencies to focus on a few of the movement's heroes. In large part, the characteristics of the men that led the movement were

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<sup>136</sup> For example, *New Reasoner 5* contains a print of George Cruikshank's image, "The Boa Desolator".

<sup>137</sup> The *ULR's* artistic content included such things as a photographic essay in *ULR 6* and a study of free cinema in *ULR 2*.

repeatedly found among the contributors. The New Left may have incorporated two hundred authors, but they largely fit into a single mold.

Eventually, the New Left's two journals combined to form the *New Left Review* in 1960. Several characteristics of the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* carried over into the new publication. Many of the contributors remained the same. The clubs and the various activist causes championed by the intellectuals of the New Left remained the movement's only avenue into the world of Britain's working people (or even just non-academics). The next section combines the use of contributor data with a survey of the role of the New Left Clubs to assert that the New Left fundamentally changed shortly after the merger. Indeed, the consolidation into *NLR* ultimately signaled the end of the First New Left in Britain.

### **The *New Left Review* and the First and Second New Lefts**

As the New Left progressed through the late 1950s and into the 1960s, the editorial teams of the two journals decided to merge their efforts. In an attempt to broaden the mood and, perhaps more importantly, pool their resources, the *New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review* became the *New Left Review (NLR)* in 1960. Naturally, E.P. Thompson, John Saville, Stuart Hall, and the other major players from the two previous publications became integral parts of the *NLR*, both as back office personnel and as contributing writers. This new journal picked up where the other two left off and became an amalgamation of its predecessors. While the falling out between the editorial board of this new journal is documented in other places, there

continues to be some debate as to whether or not there was indeed a definitive First and Second New Left in Britain.<sup>138</sup>

The *NLR* began under the charge of Stuart Hall. Hall filled the role of editor while Saville, Thompson, and others comprised the board of the new journal. This arrangement lasted, with some minor changes in the board, until Hall resigned his editorial post in 1962. From there, the reins of the journal were handed over to Perry Anderson. Anderson ushered in a new, more theoretical era that exhibited many differences from the First New Left. There was a fundamental difference between the two waves of the British New Left. This can be seen concretely in two ways. First, the change in contributors from one generation to the next illuminated a shift in ideology. Secondly, a shift in themes signaled both an end to the goals espoused in the opening editorials of *New Reasoner*, *ULR*, and *NLR*, and the death of the “mood.”

The list of contributors from the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* and the list of contributors to *NLR* yield few overlaps. Only thirty percent of *New Reasoner* and *ULR* contributors published in *NLR*. This is understandable considering the fact that one journal did not require the same number of writers as two. While *NLR* did not include most of the previous contributors to New Left journals, former contributors did provide most of the content within *NLR*. However, the majority of those who continued to publish in the new journal did so when the periodical was in its infancy. During this time it remained under the editorial control of the Hall and the First New Left.

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<sup>138</sup> Michael Kenny, *First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 2.

When adjusted to include only those who published after 1962 and the removal of First New Left influences on the editorial board, the data shows the percentage of carry-over contributors dwindled to only nine percent. Of this nine percent, less than half published more than two articles in *NLR* over the next two decades. In short, after Perry Anderson and the Second wave of the New Left gained control of the *NLR*, the majority of First New Left contributors ceased to write for the journal. There was no gradual transition from First New Left to Second according to author data. If the Second New Left had merely soldiered forth with the foundation built by the First New Left such a definable break would not have occurred.

A simple look at the author data illustrates the existence of a sharp break between waves of the New Left. The drastic drop in the number of contributors that carried over immediately after the transition from Hall to Anderson suggests that the division between the two New Lefts was not a gradual passing of a torch. Even more telling is the fact that some of the most prominent First New Left academics would come back to the *NLR* during the '80s and '90s -- after Robin Blackburn replaced Anderson as editor.

The tone of the articles and the character of the journal did not immediately abandon the trajectory that Hall, Thompson, Saville, and the others of the First New Left had set, though it would eventually. The loss of the First New Left's printed voice expedited a decline in the "mood". The "mood" had appeared to be thriving when the two original journals merged to form *NLR* in 1960. However, as Stuart Hall would recall in a 2010 article, that good feeling would not last once the *NLR*



went through its editorial changes.<sup>139</sup> The most accurate barometer of the state of the mood was the health of the clubs inspired by the New Left. The clubs provided an essential link between the original journals and their publics. While the clubs, like the journals tended to be targeted to a more scholarly, middle class audience, they remained the primary point where the proverbial rubber of the New Left met the road.

Again, statistical data is a valuable way to measure the decline in emphasis on the clubs. In the first two years of its existence, the *NLR* contained updates on clubs and letters to readers in approximately every other issue. Following the transition from First to Second New Left during 1962 and 1963, the clubs were mentioned sparingly. Their final mention was in 1964. The statement in the March-April 1964 edition was addressed to the readers as an update on the editorial situation at the *NLR*.<sup>140</sup> The clubs garnered mention only within a list of activities of the former editorial board, and were not mentioned in the short description of what the new “editorial team” would undertake. Furthermore, a look at the articles that included the mentions of Left Clubs showed just how stark a difference lay between where the journal began at its founding and where it ended up with the exit of First New Left influences.

Within the first issue alone there are three pieces that make significant mention of the clubs. Hall used his opening editorial to address the way forward for the newly merged journals. Hall described a scenario where the work of the journal

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<sup>139</sup> Hall, Stuart, “Life and Times of the First New Left”, *New Left Review* 61, Jan-Feb 2010 p. 177-96

<sup>140</sup> Perry Anderson, “Statement (on Editorial Team),” *New Left Review* 24 (March-April 1964): 112.

would include a duty to provide support to the growing number of clubs that populated Britain.<sup>141</sup> All the while the New Left continued their commitment to fostering the mood by shying away from dictating to the constituent organizations. Thompson echoed these sentiments in his first contribution to the *NLR*, and the general sense one gets from reading this is that the clubs were just as essential to the First New Left as the journal itself.<sup>142</sup> The third piece appearing in the inaugural issue detailed the Manchester Left Club and its attempts to empower the youth in the socialist movement.<sup>143</sup> The article also condemned the Labour Party for abandoning the youth movement and the Left Clubs. Little did they know that the movement they were then a part of would similarly abandon the clubs.

Subsequent issues of the *NLR* continued this theme of building up the clubs. The second issue contained a letter to readers encouraging club participation.<sup>144</sup> Issues three and four contained another piece from Thompson and an article by Saville that included club involvement as an antidote to apathy and as a key way to expand a British socialist movement.<sup>145</sup> To say that the clubs held a place at the forefront of the minds of the First New Left's leading figures would be an

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<sup>141</sup> Stuart Hall, "Editorial: Introducing *NLR*," *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 1960): 1-3.

<sup>142</sup> E.P. Thompson, "The Point of Production," *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 1960): 68-70.

<sup>143</sup> Paul Rose, "Manchester Left Club on Youth," *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 1960): 70-71.

<sup>144</sup> Stuart Hall, "Letter to Our Readers," *New Left Review* 2 (March-April 1960): 69-72.

<sup>145</sup> Saville, "Apathy Into Politics," *New Left Review* 4 (July-August 1960): 8-9; E.P. Thompson, "Revolution," *New Left Review* 3 (May-June 1960): 3-9.

understatement. To say that this mindset carried over from First to Second New Left would simply be untrue.

As the journal shifted editors, the character of the journal changed. It became even more theoretical than either *New Reasoner* or *ULR* had been. The journal ceased any attempt at addressing the needs of a disaffected working class and focused on deepening the theoretical context in which scholars debated socialism. The original publications of the First New Left certainly targeted an academic audience and emphasized and debated theory at the cost of invigorating the working class to their ideas, but the new direction of the *New Left Review* made these earlier discussions seem overtly practical by comparison.

The attitude toward the clubs became the most easily recognizable way that this change revealed itself. No longer were there frequent letters to readers, editorials focused on grass roots action, updates from clubs around Britain, or key figures in the movement spending time writing lengthy articles about practical methods to influence a more varied swath of British society. The clubs that once personified New Left ambitions for real socialist activity in Britain and garnered mention as part of *NLR's* vision in the opening editorial, virtually disappeared from the journal's consciousness when the editorial duties shifted from Hall of the First New Left to Perry Anderson of the Second.

The assertion within the historiography that the line between First and Second New Left is blurry at best, does not illustrate the monumental shift that transpired within the milieu. It is as simple to see as the change in names that appeared within the journals' pages after the editorial transition. A look at how

fundamental club activity was to the direction of the new journal at its inception and the conspicuous absence of talk of clubs with in *NLR* under the Second New Left, provided further proof that the New Left, as it had existed since 1956, was no more.

By collecting data on New Left contributors, many assumptions about the New Left can be verified or debunked. This chapter attempted to focus on just two of these. First, the New Left can be seen for what it was, a largely homogenous movement that took place amongst an elite group of left-wing academics. While this is apparent in most studies, those studies simply point to the more prolific New Left contributors. It quickly became apparent that the New Left as a whole could not only be characterized by the overwhelming number of contributing male academics, but also that nuances between *New Reasoner* and *ULR* could be elicited by looking at the geography, field of study, and age of the participants. What emerged was a New Left beset by homogeneity. While the opinions were by no means homogeneous, the people espousing them were from a strictly narrow band of British society. While geographic, gender, or scholastic diversity could have proved beneficial, the most daunting obstacle remained that the New Left could not break free from being a movement among socialist intellectuals to become a socialist movement. The lack of a working-class element to the New Left, despite contributors such as Raymond Williams coming from such a background himself, led to failed attempts at forming alliances between intellectuals and laborers. Only by attaching to specific issues, such as nuclear disarmament, could the New Left achieve any semblance of putting theory into action. The Left Clubs could have provided another avenue to popularize the movement, but the abrupt end of the First New Left, and the shift

initiated by the second, left that experiment unfinished. This is the second area that author data provided an opportunity to research further, the division between the two New Lefts.

The application of the data provided an important verification that the history of the New Left in Britain was one of two distinct waves in popularity. The First New Left sought a way forward for British socialism through discussion over the best way to build on the adoption of the Welfare State while battling the specter Stalinism casted over socialist movement in the West. While the New Left intended for their mood to permeate politics in Britain, the New Left remained predominately a movement among academics. Of course, there were articles and discussions on diverse topics like Hungary, South Africa, Mau Mau, NATO, the Cold War, Suez, and domestic economics and politics, but they were generally written by academics of similar demographics. The central role of the academic to the New Left's publishing record made it no wonder that the movement could only sustain a short-lived "mood".

The failure to sustain this mood should not be solely attributed to the First New Left however. Perhaps, as some within the movement commented, the New Left's merger was done in haste and the characteristics of the two individual journals provided a recipe for disaster. This manifested itself in the editorial turmoil and ultimate shift from a First to a Second New Left. However, the reports on increased club activity and the message of grass roots socialist activism through clubs and organizations like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament that populated the pages of the first few pages of *New Left Review* signaled an effort by the First

New Left to find a wider audience. Whether this could have sustained itself long enough to become a full-fledged movement for socialist change, especially among the youth of Britain, is impossible to know. What we do know is that any chance it may have possessed quickly vanished when the intentions of the Second New Left to create an even more theory-centered publication became known. From this point on, there would be figures within the New Left, such as Tariq Ali, who involved themselves in grassroots struggles, particularly the peace movement surrounding the war in Vietnam. However, these activities would largely take place in Trotskyist organizations, not any channels specifically supported by the New Left itself. The “mood”, carefully tended to by the First New Left, became an afterthought to more intense debates about theory and reporting and analysis of “third-world” socialist uprising.

The contributors of the First New Left continued publishing, teaching, and maintaining active roles in struggles pertinent to their intentions of furthering socialism. However, the organic “mood” that they had, perhaps at first unwittingly, cultivated came and went. The conditions that saw the New Left rise from the turmoil of Stalinism and the apathy of a conservative-led Britain to the cusp of forging a socialist movement passed.

## Conclusion

Born out of the turmoil of 1956, the First New Left emerged as a viable alternative to the structured, dogmatic socialism of the Communist Party. It represented a way forward for socialism that recaptured the spirit at the creation of the Welfare State. Simultaneously the New Left projected spirit of socialism in direct opposition to what the term had largely come to mean in the wake of Stalinism. The socialism espoused by E.P. Thompson and the rest of the early contributors to the New Left, in their own eyes, marked a return to the socialism of William Morris and a younger, more humanistic Marx. Ultimately these ideas never materialized into tangible political change of any kind.

That the First New Left in Britain failed to develop into a full-fledged movement for socialist change is clear. However, the New Left cannot be seen to fail where it did not intend to succeed. Throughout the work of the group, the desire for a loosely-affiliated “mood” is preferred to the push for a party-like structure. While the nature of an unstructured movement garnered criticism from later biographers of the group, such analyses fail to account for the context from which the New Left emerged. For example, the intellectuals who founded the First New Left did so to escape the bureaucracy and hierarchical stifling of dissent that existed within the established parties of the Left. Their decision to eschew any semblance of such a structure cannot be ignored when one considers that the New Left consciously avoided the rigidity of the parties. That this was a preoccupation of the New Left can be proven by the sheer amount of attention that such concepts as Stalinism garnered in the print material of the group. Years after the revelations of 1956, the

scars left by Soviet perversion of socialist principles was still being atoned for in New Left publications with unambiguous appeals to return to pre-Soviet principles aligned with a notion of Socialist Humanism.

In addition, the New Left must be considered for what it was, an intellectual movement. The author data proves that the group lacked the diversity needed to propel it beyond intellectual circles and begin influencing and incorporating working people of Britain. The New Left was unable to penetrate the labor movement at large. The monopolistic hold on the Left possessed by the Labour Party and the New Left's inability to wield enough influence to get even its own contributors to stand opposed to Labour, proved an additional obstacle. When looked at as a whole, one can see that, like anything else, the New Left was both a response to and victim of the circumstances in which it found itself.

While failing to institute political change, the group persisted in debating issues seen as important. Throughout the life of the *New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review*, the journals provided a forum for ideas to be dissected and redirected. It was this very process of refining and debating ideas that sparked the creation of the original *Reasoner* and the divorce from the CPGB. The New Left's original goal of creating a space for dissenting opinions to be heard, considered, and responded to, remained a goal to the end. Unlike the other objectives that came about as the New Left evolved, this one was certainly a goal accomplished.



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