

# Britain's "Pink Decade"

*Communism and British Intellectuals,*  
by Neal Wood.  
Columbia University Press, New York, 1959.

Reviewed by Stephen Spender

ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS of the 20th century is, notoriously, the cult of youth. By now it is taken for granted that each decade will see a new generation reacting against those who were young in the previous decade, and coming forward with ideas that their seniors take with a great show of seriousness. There is even perhaps a feeling, shared by all generations, that one day the young might really hit upon something which would "save" our civilization.

However, when we look back upon the young of previous decades, we have a feeling very much like that of the "morning after," when we wake up with a bad hangover. Such a vicarious, transferred hangover is now beginning to be felt about the "Angry Young Men"—just as it was felt 30 years ago about the "Bright Young Things," and 20 years ago about the "Pink Decade" of the 1930's.

It is impossible to justify a worship of the young which leads to perpetual disappointment, made inevitable by the simple fact that the young get old. Why, then, do we go on looking expectantly to the youth of each succeeding generation? Various explanations are possible, one being, perhaps, that the youth cult began in the First World War, when the old did indeed force the young into being heroes. After the war, the young of the 1920's staged their revenge against the old by rejecting the concept of social responsibility. From this point of view, the young of the 1930's were voluntarily reliving the "war to end war": they were the volunteers who assumed the place of the young men slaughtered on the Western Front in 1914-1918. The intellectuals of

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the "Pink Decade" did in fact identify themselves to some extent with the suffering and the poetry of the trenches, expressed in the poems of Wilfred Owen, the novels and memoirs which began to appear ten years after the Treaty of Versailles. Moreover, young Englishmen like John Cornford, Ralph Fox and Julian Bell, who died in Spain, thought that by fighting for the Spanish Republic they might avert a second world war.

These thoughts are brought to mind by Neal Wood's *Communism and British Intellectuals*. But perhaps what strikes one most in reading the book is how remote seems today the period when the British Communist Party was at its intellectual apogee.

Thinking, as we tend to do, in terms of the intellectual fashions afflicting youth in each decade, it is easy enough—and indeed the younger generation today is inclined—to think of the communism and antifascism of the 1930's as such a fashion. That is what is so bad about the cult of youth. It makes every attitude appear like a kind of clothing suitable to the day on the calendar and the age of the wearer.

THE TRUTH IS that the young, far from being free agents who can introduce onto the scene of our lives a completely new idea which might redeem us all, are to a peculiar extent victims of our time. What we take to be their shout of victory is often just a yell of hatred for the old, whom they feel to be the setters of a trap into which they have just fallen. It is true that they care deeply for freedom, but this is because, more than the old who have gained some degree of material independence, they are aware of the constraints of an age which is dominated by money and power.

To see things in this light is not flattering to the young. It does, however, put them back in the situation in which we all live, and thus prevents their attitudes from seeming as completely unreasonable as do those of the 1930's when looked back upon by a new lot of young people who have been flattered by their elders into thinking that the attitude before theirs was but a silly pose.

The fellow-travelling anti-fascists of the 1930's were by no means so naive, so deceived, so credulous, or so foolish as they may appear to the young of today, who tend to look back on them simply as supporters of a literary fashion in which certain poems were written, and for which certain people died. Mr. Wood's book is invaluable in that it puts the "intellectuals" of that extraordinary decade back into their own contemporary environment. When they are put there, the problem becomes the opposite of that which arises when one judges them simply by their youthful work: the difficulty now is to understand how any young person with sympathy for his fellow beings and a sense of responsibility could have taken a different attitude.

Anyone who lived through the 1930's himself, or who has examined the thought of that period in the light of the historic situation as it then existed, may well feel that, had the Communists not been what they were, a great many more British intellectuals would have become—and remained—Communists. This may sound paradoxical, but it becomes less so if one examines the three main factors involved: (1) the hard core of revolutionaries in control of the British Communist Party; (2) the situation of the 1930's; and (3) the men of good will, the anti-fascists, and especially the young writers and students of that decade.

The hard-core revolutionaries were already party members before 1930 and were dominated by a few leaders who had participated in the General Strike of 1926 and endured prison sentences, who were doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist-Stalinists, and whose main preoccupation was (and still is) the idea that the lifeline of communism is the party line as laid down by Moscow. The two chief leaders were remarkable men and made a remarkable combination: Harry Pollitt, the likable, warm-blooded, outspoken boiler-maker from Lancaster; and Palme Dutt, the austere, cold, dedicated theoretician.

The situation of the 1930's was really three situations rolled into one. First, there was the mass unemployment which resulted from the disastrous economic policies pursued following the Treaty of Versailles and climaxed by the Wall Street crash of 1929; second, the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933; and third, the Spanish Civil War—dress rehearsal for World War II.

The "men of good will" were mostly young intellectuals of middle-class upbringing who were gripped by a complex of guilt, empathy and resistance as a result of the threefold situation. Guilt, because it was the very social system to which they owed their own social advantages that also had produced the killing disease of unemployment. Empathy, not just for the unemployed, but also for the victims of fascism, intellectuals like

themselves. Resistance against the fascists in Spain, where the civil war provided an opportunity to unleash some of their frustrated passion against fascism, and where it also seemed that a determined defense of the Republican cause might avert a second world war.

In these circumstances Europe seemed the stage of a classical revolutionary situation, a crisis of capitalism. The Marxist analysis of the situation had great appeal because its objectivity and completeness, its program for reversing the whole existing system, demanded dedication of the entire interests and personalities of those who supported it in order to produce a change in the entire situation. In the age of a black and cruel totalitarianism, total evil could, it seemed, only be answered with total measures.

THERE REMAINED, however, the problems of freedom and truth. In order to make the changes that were necessary, there could not be liberal freedom. Questions of freedom and truth became the topics most agonizingly debated among the young of the 1930's. And it is a significant fact that the Communists never quite succeeded in inducing more than a few British intellectuals, who supported the Communists' policies, their economics, and their action in Spain, to accept also the way in which they put into practice the famous Marxist formula that "freedom is the recognition of necessity." Why was this?

The extended perspective of Mr. Wood's survey suggests an interesting answer to this question. It is that thinking men and women who care deeply for freedom will accept restrictions on their freedom to say what they know or believe to be the truth, and on their personal liberty, only within the limited circumstances of an action in which they can have a realistic grasp of political necessity. Thus, most supporters of the Spanish Republic accepted—just as patriots in other wars have accepted—the fact that there had to be a certain amount of propaganda surrounding the cause; that one could not admit atrocities committed by one's own side; that, as long as there were soldiers dying for a side which on the whole seemed better than the opposing one, their confidence ought not to be undermined by the insistence of some supporters of the Republic upon carrying on a perpetual inquest into all its doings—especially since a good many of its opponents were already doing just this.

Within the limits of such an unpleasant but perhaps inevitable discipline, restrictions on freedom can be accompanied by an expansion of the human spirit expressing itself in ways which are no less expressions of freedom. Revolutions are in fact like this. There is a

great deal of *repression*, but there is also a great deal of *expression*. Even the Russian Revolution, in its initial phases, had this dual aspect. Until the mid-1920's, its violence of repression was accompanied by experimentation ranging from the arts and the cinema to the universalization of free love.

The Spanish Republic, in stimulating what was a short-lived intellectual renaissance in Spain, gave outlets to this desire for an expansion of the human spirit. But the British Communists—and, in fact, Communists everywhere—did not. Instead of the limited repression of truth and freedom which men of good will can accept as a voluntary discipline, the Communists sought to impose an ideology of repression which, both in theory and in practice, was almost indistinguishable from fascism. Instead of saying that there are times when one has to be quiet about the truth, they denied that there was such a thing as objective truth. Truth was something manufactured to suit a particular set of interests, and all that mattered was that the interests be those of the proletariat and not of capitalism.

Thus, the Communists confronted their fellow-travellers not just with the necessity of making responsible, if agonizing, decisions about truth and freedom, but with the far more tormenting problem of ends and means. The debate among the young anti-fascists began to take the form of asking one another whether their comrades were entitled to use the means of their opponents in order to achieve ends which were assumed to be quite different.

THE REASON WHY the debate took this form was, of course, because the Communists were determined to superimpose upon the exigencies of socialist revolution in Europe the further exigencies of Stalinism in the Soviet Union. The Communist-sympathizing anti-fascist who wished to oppose the lie of the British government's non-intervention policy in Spain (which provided Mussolini with an excuse for sinking British merchant ships carrying provisions to Spanish Republican ports) was also expected to defend the lie of Stalin's trials of his own comrades. In fact, what was a "lying policy" when practiced by the democratic capitalist powers became pure truth when practiced by Communist Russia. And the British Communists, led by Pollitt and Palme Dutt, were fanatical defenders of the lie become truth by conversion from a capitalist to a Communist context.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Wood does not mention what was surely a turning point in the relations between the intellectuals and the Communists. Perhaps the reason for this omission is that André Gide, who was responsible for it, was French. But the author might have pointed out that Gide's *Retour de l'URSS* (which, incidentally, was translated into English) touched off a crisis in the relations of all Western Communist parties with their fellow travellers.

André Gide went to Russia in the middle of the 1930's, was received with honor, banqueted and feted, and on his return published his journal of the visit. While sympathetic to communism, it told of the absurd idolatry of Stalin and gave some impression of the atmosphere of terror in Russia. Gide was immediately denounced all over the world as a fascist, and the arguments adduced against him were similar to those used during the First World War against anyone who had read German philosophy. It was, I believe, this unconcealed fury against Gide which, more than anything else, made English writers realize the pressures the Communists were exerting on them not to portray the truth, either of fact or of the imagination.

One of Mr. Wood's most interesting chapters deals with scientists who embraced communism, and it suggests some curious conclusions. One—as the chapter title, "Utopians of Science," indicates—is that scientists toy with scientific ideas in their social thinking, either because they tend to assume (as the general public may also do) that all their thinking is objectively scientific, or because they permit themselves, in their thinking about society, a carelessness which they would never allow in the laboratory. Communism appeals to them because it holds forth the picture of a society which is thought about analytically, and in which science will play a leading role. To some scientists, the benefits which a scientifically governed world could bestow on future generations entirely removes from consideration the suffering and injustice which its construction may impose upon the present. Thus, odd as this may seem, the scientists were far less concerned than the poets about Communist distortions of truth.

This is, in sum, an interesting book which performs a very great service for the study of communism. The time has perhaps not yet come to pass final judgment on the historic significance of the British intellectuals in communism, but Mr. Wood's book suggests how important the subject is.

## *The CMEA: A Progress Report*

IN AN ARTICLE published in these pages a year ago, this writer discussed the problems of economic integration of the Soviet orbit.<sup>1</sup> How have efforts to interlock the economic plans of the East European countries progressed since then, and how much closer has the Russian-sponsored Council of Mutual Economic Aid (CMEA) moved toward implementing supranational long-term planning?

The scope and intensity of the CMEA's activities have increased distinctly over the past year or so. Its functions now reach into virtually every economic sector—industry, agriculture, trade, transport, communications, banking. It has become the central mechanism for intra-bloc coordination of planning techniques, national accounting methods, and even of some areas of economic thought. It has also become an important clearing house for the spread and assimilation of technological “know-how.” Yet, for all this broadening of its activities, the CMEA has not proved very successful in achieving an economically efficient coordination of the bloc.

Two major—and partly conflicting—considerations nurture the East European planners' sense of the system's inadequacy. There is, on the one hand, an increasingly articulate recognition that inequalities of size and natural endowment combine with differences in the stage of industrialization to perpetuate or even widen disparities in levels of economic development among the members of the bloc. Thus, recent Soviet calculations (the first of the kind to be revealed) suggest that the industrial output of Rumania and Bulgaria—the two Balkan latecomers to industrialization—equals no more than about one-half and two-fifths, respectively, of the Soviet per capita figure.<sup>2</sup> As for the industrially advanced Central European members of the bloc, the political capability of the Soviet Union to keep real wages at extraordinarily low levels affords the USSR a lasting and increasing advantage over them no less important than its bigness and natural wealth.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Zauberman, “Economic Integration: Problems and Prospects,” *Problems of Communism*, No. 4 (July-August), 1959.

<sup>2</sup> *Voprosy Ekonomiki*, No. 1, 1960, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> See a polemic between M. Rakowski, *Gospodarka Planowa* (Warsaw), No. 6, 1958, pp. 8 ff., A. Bodnar, *ibid.*, No. 8, 1958, pp. 19 ff., and S. Polaczek, *ibid.*, pp. 24 ff.

The following table compares real wages of industrial workers in the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany as of 1958:<sup>4</sup>

	Average monthly earnings	Zloty equivalent	The same USSR=100
USSR	785 rub.	1190	100
Poland	1621 zl.	1621	136
Czechoslovakia	1325 Kcs	1740	147
East Germany	436 DM (O)	1820	153

There is also good reason to believe that sheer preponderance of power favors the Soviet Union's bargaining position *vis-à-vis* her small partners.<sup>5</sup> In sum, it must be expected that, under the present rules, some members of the CMEA “family of equals” will continue growing more “equal” than others.

On the other hand, the fundamental inconsistency of attempting to integrate *non-market* economies by means of a *market* has become increasingly obvious. International trade on a crude bilateral basis has remained, in practice, the principal instrument of integration: arrangements for intra-bloc commerce in the period 1961–65 have been or are being made by pairs of CMEA members, more or less on a barter basis. Various attempts to give some degree of multilateral character to bloc trade arrangements have failed, and this is now being frankly admitted.

DISCUSSING THE PROBLEMS of rational planning in his recently published major theoretical study, the Polish economist, Professor Oskar Lange, argues that economic rationality in a socialist society grows by stages, first via national and later via *international*

<sup>4</sup> Figures drawn from national statistics. Soviet earnings estimated. Purchasing power parities taken to be: 1 zl. = 0.66 rub. = 0.78 Kcs = 0.24 DM (E). These were derived from computations based on Polish expenditure structures, carried out by the National Bank of Poland. Cf. A. Zwass, *Gospodarka Planowa*, No. 10, 1959, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> See the examination of intra-bloc terms-of-trade by Horst Mendershausen, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1959.