Interview with Robin Blackburn

What conclusions do you draw from New Left experience so far?

The explosion of left activity of a "new" kind in the past decade represents a profound break with the political style and practice of the post-war left—the "old left". At the same time it involves the rediscovery of the most militant traditions of the best of the old left, forms of direct action which draw on populist or anarchist traditions. (By "old left" I can refer specifically only to Europe and North America, and primarily to social-democratic and communist parties and some trotskyst groups.) Most of the conventional political activities of the old left failed to touch directly the everyday life of the masses in capitalist society or encourage them to take direct action against the system which oppressed them. The only form of direct action consistently recognised was the conventional industrial strike (the workers go home and do nothing) a form of action whose inherent limitations had already been irrefutably established within the workers' movement long ago (by

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Robin Blackburn visited Australia on the invitation of ALR on his way home from a Universities Conference in New Zealand. He addressed meetings organised by ALR in Sydney on February 20, on Trade Unionism and on the New Left.

The above interview was written up for ALR by Alec Robertson from tape recordings of several interviews organised by the Editorial Board during his short stay.

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Lenin in *What is to be Done?* and Gramsci in *Ordine Nuovo*: see *New Left Review* No. 51 for some of the latter texts).

The relation of old left formations to society was defined by the use of words — in publications, party documents, slogan-demonstrations, petitions, election campaign and other meetings. Evils, disproportions and contradictions of capitalism were analysed. There seemed to be the belief that capitalism would ultimately drown in a rising tide of socialist consciousness deriving from a combination of socialist propaganda and either a favorable economic conjuncture (“the crisis of capitalism”) or a providentially favorable political conjuncture (“peaceful coexistence”). This belief embraced also those seeking a more active relation to the mechanisms of capitalist society through advancing certain “demands” or “reforms” unrealisable within the framework of a stable capitalism (e.g. “structural reform”, “transitional demands”). But “raising consciousness” is illusory activity unless popular institutions exist to incarnate that new consciousness and ultimately to smash and break up capitalist power by the hard blows of popular force.

The new left movements (stemming from such movements as CND sitdowns in Britain and through Berkeley, Berlin, France, Italy and Belfast) express themselves through militant action, directly involving the concerned masses of people both in the activity and in control (there is an anti-centralist quality) and with a built-in immediacy that invariably eluded the old left. Particular actions tangibly partake of the liberating impulse. Students occupying their colleges visibly incarnate one dimension of their demand for “student power” and, by extension, for popular control of everyday life in all spheres. Instead of the old parties and trade unions engaged in complex paper manoeuvres we frequently see social forces engaged in direct confrontation with the system—the black liberation movement in the USA; the Irish of Bogside and Belfast who temporarily established popular power within sealed-off “green bases” in urban blocks; the French vanguard occupation of factories in 1968; the first factory occupation in British labor history, in a car factory last year. Exposure of the system and concepts of a future society may be extracted in part from the actions themselves.

Among the new left there can be found new revolutionary perspectives based on these concepts of revolutionary practice but at the same time they lack theoretical perspective. Whether reformist or revolutionary, the condition of new left organisation and ideology is inchoate. As a whole, the new left has learned
to stir things up but has never yet looked like being able to create a serious confrontation with capitalism.

**How do you see the roles of spontaneous struggle and of theory?**

Many would-be marxist theorists in Europe greeted the recent false-dawn of revolutionary activity with an intoxication of ultra-leftism. The tide of popular revolt may have helped to dislodge Johnson and De Gaulle, but it is dubious success to replace Johnson with Nixon. The smooth surface of reformism and revisionism has not been dented and they are unlikely to be displaced until the revolutionary movement is as coherent in its own way as they are in theirs. At present the new left justifies anything it does in agitation and provocation because it wakes people from their passivity. But reliance on spontaneity is as misconceived as was the old left resistance to spontaneous struggle. Spontaneity seen as spontaneous resistance of the masses to capitalism is the most precious thing in the workers' movement. But a spontaneous popular impulse can only overthrow the system if (as Lenin said) the new forms of action are taken up and developed and enriched with theory. No doubt we should be grateful for the real achievements of the past few years: the established order has been shaken a bit, new forms of popular resistance to the system have emerged, some especially oppressed groups have acquired a collective confidence and combativity they previously lacked and it may even be true that the nucleus of a revolutionary cadre has emerged.

But revolutionary theory properly conceived should go beyond this to envisage the concrete possibilities for the further transformation of social relations now accessible to revolutionary practice. That transformation is what constitutes new revolutionary politics; but revolutionary theory must produce the knowledge necessary for such transformation to become possible. Revolutionaries need to know the essential rather than the apparent workings of the social system (without ignoring the appearance). The reality of capitalist society that people live should be the starting point of both revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice; and both can be transformed in the course of acting on the contradictions to be discovered within that reality.

Armed with the concrete analysis of a concrete situation that Lenin called the "living soul of marxism", the revolutionary should have a provisional conception of the structures of power and of social forces within the social formation. In this sense theory is certainly not confined to critiques of the established society and its ideologics.
We should re-study Lenin's critique of spontaneity, which was directed above all against the notion of the spontaneous self-destruction of the capitalist system itself — for example, against the idea that economic or trade union struggles necessarily lead to revolution or socialism. This gave Lenin the best reason for revolutionaries to involve themselves in the unions. Today, that cult of spontaneity is reappearing in the new version that such groups as the "new" working class, middle strata, intellectual workers could have spontaneous access to socialist consciousness that was denied to industrial proletarians; that they are bound to demand increasing autonomy in their work situation and that this is a naturally socialist demand. But for revolutionaries, revolution must remain a creative, conscious, collective act which cannot be achieved in the twilight realm of ideology nor by relying on bourgeois society to fashion a naturally socialist consciousness. Capitalist society may produce its own gravediggers; but it is up to the latter to slay the monster and inter it in its grave.

Nor should it be imagined for one moment that the established society furnishes ready-made that alliance of the oppressed and exploited which alone can make the revolution. No spontaneous harmony between or within the potentially revolutionary classes can be assumed. Such harmony as is revealed by scientific analysis to be possible must be encouraged by the revolutionaries; real social antagonisms between such classes and strata are generated by capitalism and cannot be dispelled merely by rhetorical talk of "the people". In stressing the importance today of the voluntaristic moment in Lenin's thought it must, of course, never be forgotten that Leninist political practice works itself out through the given matrix of pre-existing contradictions. Nor should it be thought that privileged access to culture and research facilities gives the lonely intellectual in his study the capability of generating a fully adequate socialist theory. Revolutionary theory develops and sharpens in the interaction and dialectic between revolutionary intellectuals and mass activity. The space where it occurs is the revolutionary party without which, in the long run, there will be no cross-fertilisation and accumulation of practice and theory.

What do you think of the general situation of marxist theory today?

In the Stalin period, European marxist theory was driven outside politics for a whole era. From 1923 to 1960 — say from the publication of Georg Lukacs' History and Class Consciousness and Jean-Paul Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason, either culture criticism or philosophical discourse on method became its main
content. Theory was no longer concerned with making the revolution in Europe and was subordinated to defeating fascism and defending the USSR. Exceptions were Gramsci and Trotsky up to the forties, but working as non-participant observers.

Today, marxism in Europe is returning to revolutionary politics, stimulated both by the new upsurge of left activity and by the work of the most advanced of the culture-critics (such as Marcuse and Gorz) and the philosophers (such as Althusser and Colletti). The picture is uneven. Some writers in the field are doing little more than celebrate the upsurge or adjust it to their own marxist preconceptions. But, given an event like France 1968, what is needed after the lyrical propaganda is a scientific understanding of the relationship of forces between capitalism-imperialism on the one hand and the revolutionary movement on the other, and of the conditions that would permit a decisive change of this relationship.

In the realm of new left practice, one finds various streams of inspiration including the Chinese cultural revolution, Vietnam, Trotsky, the Cuban revolution, but also the anti-imperialist guerrilla war systems of the third world which, setting aside the "big bang" revolution theory, set out to change things piecemeal (like land ownership) while confronting the whole system. But we still have to learn from that section of the old left that renewed marxism and leninism in the course of anti-imperialist struggle which proved that the strategy and tactics of these revolutions is in part more relevant to the revolution in advanced capitalist countries than is the October revolution. This aspect is that they depended on the mass support and participation of the great majority of the population just as revolutions in advanced countries will have to do.

It will also be necessary to make ourselves the heirs of our own European revolutionary traditions, and study the great debates involving Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky, Luxembourg, Parvus, Trotsky, Lukacs, Korsch, Gramsci and many others. We must investigate the successes and failures of the movement. And above all the purpose must be to learn from them about the nature of revolutionary practice, of which the supreme exponent in his epoch was Lenin. The premise of all Lenin's writings, the first thesis that is in process of being re-grasped, is the ACTUALITY OF THE REVOLUTION. Convinced, given the historical possibility and necessity of the global overthrow of capitalism in the conditions of imperialism, that revolution was on the order of the day, he devoted himself entirely to its preparation and its victory. Further, Lenin replaced the traditional inevitabilist notion that capitalism would be overtaken by a revolution radiating out from its heart-
lands, by the theory that the break would come at the weakest link of imperialism. These weak links will continue to provide the points of insertion of revolutionary practice, points where the export of capital and war combine to enfeeble the local capitalist class and awaken the masses. Althusser writes well in his essay “On the Materialist Dialectic” on Lenin’s insistence on the application of revolutionary practice to the only history available to us — the present.

What would you see as the major theoretical problems for marxists today?

There is so much to be done after the long night of Stalin and all that. We must catch up on so many fronts. But I think there would be a high political priority for theoretical analysis of the nature and limits of bourgeois democracy. We have no adequate theory of how it operates and how it ensures the consensus of the population. To this is related such problems as what are the limits to confrontation and provocation-type tactics through which a strategic minority sometimes may help to detonate mass struggle and at other times may produce the isolation and smashing of the vanguard group. Of course, we cannot expect to work out formulae that would provide guarantees, but rather a greater knowledge of the limitations of tactics. In capitalist society we are condemning and rejecting the form of democracy that capitalism rests on — very limited participation by the mass of the population who are mostly silent and atomised. Their activity is limited to voting at an election booth, an activity that is abstracted from other social processes. Of course bourgeois political scientists sometimes get worried if the population is too passive (meaning that the system is not integrating them) — or too active. The Provo and other groups pursuing confrontation tactics have been aiming at forcing the capitalist state to use its monopoly of violence

* . . . the theory of the “weakest link” is identical with the theory of the “decisive link”. Once we have realised this we can return to Lenin with a quiet mind. However much any ideologist tries to bury him beneath a proof by historical analysis, there is always this one little man standing there in the plain of history and our lives, that eternal “current situation”. He goes on talking, calmly or passionately. He goes on talking to us about something quite simple: about his revolutionary practice, about the practice of the class struggle, in other words, about what makes it possible to act on history from within the sole history present, about what is specific in the contradiction and in the dialectic, about the specific difference in the contradiction which quite simply allows us not to demonstrate or explain the “inevitable” revolutions POST FESTUM, but to “make” them in our unique present or, as Marx profoundly formulated it, to make the dialectic into a revolutionary method, rather than the theory of the FAIT ACCOMPLI. (Althusser, For Marx London, 1969, p. 180).
in order to destroy the legitimacy of the main pillar of bourgeois society — the ideological and cultural component which comprises both the ideas used and the condition of isolated relations.

There are many other urgent problems for the development of marxism in the theoretical sense. One with priority would be clarification of the sense in which marxism is a science. There is the debate between those seeing socialism in the humanist way and those seeing scientific socialism. I favor the scientific approach. In the last analysis, socialism is the form of society that resolves the contradiction of capitalist society. Any appeal to humanism — usually ill-conceived — leads to some ideology of supra-historical human nature rather than the marxist concept of a human nature to a great extent historically determined. An appeal to morality is even more treacherous, as morality implies a particular consensus in society and it takes the form of appeal to the established form of society or to the members of the existing society, to seek in the existing structure provision of a better form — a contradiction in terms. Until the acceptable form of society exists, the language of morals is inappropriate.

**How would you describe the fundamental contradiction of capitalism today?**

The fundamental contradiction within the imperialist complex remains that between the increasingly social nature of the forces of production and the private character of appropriation via the relations of production. For us in the West the key problem is to discover the ways in which this fundamental contradiction is constituted. We know that imperialist wars have had a more revolutionary impact than depressions. We know that the expansion of capital in the metropolitan countries requires increasingly underdevelopment or stagnation or a “structural slump” in the subordinate, “poor” sectors of the capitalist world. The significance of this selective retardation and exploitation of these countries required the lengthy travail of the liberation movements to expose it. But it is not enough for us to cheer on the liberation revolutions. In the homelands of imperialism we must be discovering the constitutive elements of the fundamental contradiction within each sector, each institution of late capitalism. Baran and Sweezy have given some idea of ways in which surplus value is realised. A revolutionary practice can be discerned, for example, in the higher education system, or the “welfare” social service system — both modes of surplus absorption. Every major capitalist nation has its super-exploited and oppressed minority, corresponding exactly to Marx’s “nomad” population and “industrial reserve army”.

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What do you think of the problem of determinism in marxism?

The key formulation in marxism — social being determines consciousness — has perhaps been misunderstood or not properly transferred in the English interpretations. English philosophical tradition shows a concern with an empiricist, causal relation between A and B — “If A, then B”. This has given rise to two sorts of errors: (1) the mechanistic determinism we find among dogmatists, deducing effects in the superstructure from the economic base; and (2) an allied form where, in the face of this dogmatism, there is a turn to Engels’ explanation of how Marx and he had in youth deliberately emphasised the economic moment in society, because it had been neglected and that, in fact, there is an interaction of the superstructure on the base — not just a one-way process but a dialectical relation, and says that only in the last instance does the base determine the superstructure. Such references by Engels don’t really help unless considered together with a better understanding of the original hypotheses of Marx.

All science establishes determinations, but not just “if A, then B”. It sets limits, and contemporary science is searching for meaningful relations between whole groups of properties. In this context, one can think of concepts that Perry Anderson develops in an essay on social structure, where he talks about negative determination.

He notes that a given economic level in society doesn’t necessarily produce any one particular policy or superstructure, but perhaps excludes some policy or form of superstructure. For example, a primitive level of economic development does not permit of a truly socialist form of society. Extending this, one may say that a modern industrial economy excludes anything that can meaningfully be called a feudal form of society. That is establishing determinism in a different sense, in that it limits possible social structures. That’s one approach. Marxism doesn’t so much generalise about the economic base and its determination in all forms of society, but rather about how it operates differently in different historical epochs.

One can ask, too, whether by economic base we mean productive forces or production relations, which may determine in different ways. It may be that negative determination is a feature of the forces of production (level of economic development of society) and that relations of production determine in a rather different sense. For example, there is the Lukacsian notion that in capitalist society specifically you get an overall determination not just from
the forces of production but also from the relations of production and the argument has even been put that it is really capitalism that reveals domination of politics by economics, and that the precise definition of socialism is the suppression of this determination, which is reversed in socialism — politics determining economics. In fact, despite all the weaknesses of development of the various socialist countries, it is still true that policy determines the social structure for good or ill, but politics isn’t replacing economic forces. Unfortunately, socialist production relations don’t necessarily determine socialist policies; indeed, the reverse.

Another line of research is contained in the Althusser school which promises to be most rewarding. First, the notion of the necessary complexity of any social totality — that all real historical social formations have an already given complexity that cannot be reduced to the simplicity of a single concept, e.g. “capitalism”. All real capitalist societies are accretions including pre-capitalist social formations integrated with a capitalist formation, or capitalist formations of a particular type with a particular insertion into the world capitalist system. Capitalism is not the simplified social structure Marx predicted in the Communist Manifesto, written on the eve of the bourgeois revolution which he thought would lead to bourgeois simplification of society with the polarisation of social classes which would in turn produce the big clash between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He argues that Marx in practice, though not always very adequately at the conceptual level, operated a new type of dialectic — materialistic dialectic — in which determination is always over-determination, i.e. that any concrete historical conjuncture is the effect of many social forces that matches the complexity of the given society.

Therefore notions like Lenin’s theory of the weakest link or the concept of the law of uneven development corresponds to the complexity of the already given complex totality of capitalist society in imperialism. On the global level, this is not just the theory of multi-causality that is presented by bourgeois sociologists; in over-determination to some extent each cause interacts upon and modifies the effect of each other cause so sometimes, it is said, over-determination is the reflection in each instance of every other instance of social practice. For example, in the Russian Revolution, the terms in which class struggle between the working class and the Russian bourgeoisie and the foreign bourgeoisie in Russia were fought out were probably modified also by the fact that a class struggle was going on in the countryside. So it’s not just multi-causality or a gratuitous multi-causal or interactive process of its different sections which wouldn’t be far from the Engels formulation...
or, in a different way, from the bourgeois sociologists. What's wrong with this is its lack of discrimination between the different influence of different causes or levels of operation. This isn't even a question of what sociologists call a stratified system or of quantifying the importance of the influence of each cause. It's a question of grasping the structure of the historical process.

Althusser and others have returned to the question, in what sense "in the last instance" the economic is determinant. Althusser says that within a structure we can see both dominance and determinism, at least, and other possible relations between different elements of the structure. To some extent the economic is determinant in the last instance because it always selects what is to be the dominant in the social structure. At certain points in the Middle Ages, in the realm of ideology, the Christian religion was the predominant feature of society, but it can also be argued that economics selected this aspect. It can be argued that in capitalist society, the economic is not only determinant but also dominant. The idea is to produce concepts that translate out away from the simple idea "if A, then B", into firstly the notion of limits and ranges, and secondly in the direction of different types of determination and domination and the historical theory that determination operates differently in capitalist and pre- and post-capitalist society.

All this just designates areas of research. There is a theory of the combination of elements within a social formation, e.g. what is the predominant mode of production? These are extrapolated from various criteria put forward by Marx in Capital, but not theorised generally by him, e.g., the status of labor in society. All this can be tricky theoretically, but much more rewarding than going back and inverting, dogmatism.

In the light of that, why do you think the consciousness of the working class in Britain or Australia, say, is not higher than it is?

I think that generally the answer lies in objective causes that we couldn't have done much about. I would suggest the most decisive relation has been that between the development of capitalism into imperialism and the predominance of reformism in the working class at the political level. This is much more than a labor aristocracy receiving crumbs from the imperialist table. We have seen, in the case of Britain and the USA, politically feeble labor movements at the period of imperialism reaching its height. However there are also objective changes that will help overcome the situation.
Firstly, the development of the national liberation movement. Its economic impact is well expressed, for example, through the loss of China to imperialism. Politically — and more decisively — there have been successful struggles against imperialism which have raised real alternatives to imperialism. The existence of a relatively peaceful situation in the working class is connected with the fact that imperialist development created a very strong bourgeoisie with powerful means to suppress the working class both ideologically and with coercion; but Vietnam, for example, has interfered with this.

Secondly, there is a rebirth of inter-capitalist competition. Some say this is no longer significant, due to the rise of multi-national companies or the domination of the USA; but we at the NLR are not convinced of this. British society saw the emergence of the labor movement at the beginning of the century around the time of increased competition which faced and threatened British capitalism; militant class struggles preceded World War I. Today the USA is feeling such threats, involving the rise of Japanese and West German capitalism. In the USA there are now forms of class struggle among the most exploited sectors of the working class, the minorities. It is not yet so among the white working class there, which also differentiates itself racially from them, but it should be noted that even working class racism, being more open, is different from the racism of the Establishment.

How do you see the role and character of revolutionary organisation; or a revolutionary party?

I believe that the Leninist principles of the revolutionary party are, in their essence, valid today. First, however, we must ensure that we are dealing with Lenin’s principles, and not a Stalinist version of “Lenin’s party”. Next is the problem of how we should interpret them in an advanced capitalist country, and further we should enrich them with such socialist theories as those propounded by Gramsci.

At the heart of Lenin’s approach is the notion that such a party should be democratic, though the scope and nature of this quality is not a simple matter. The Bolshevik party was characterised by very vigorous debate, involving the creation of different platforms and estimates without the practice of witchhunts in Lenin’s lifetime, and this helped make the party’s position in society more flexible, and it increased the socialist education of the membership. The fact that Lenin had to fight for his policies, often from a minority viewpoint, certainly helped educate the membership and has given
us the classics of Leninist ideas on the party. The development of polemics in the party is its lifeblood and helps give it flexibility; if there is no such development, then the currents develop outside the party reducing the potential of its impact when it is ready to act.

We recall that Lenin could remain in the same section of the same party as Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev and others with whom he had sharp differences at times. Obviously he valued the multiplicity within the revolutionary ranks, stressing that diversity helped maintain flexibility, fighting spirit and dialectical preparedness. In the party, diverse currents should meet to achieve a common purpose and perspective. The most militant members of other groups should, in the party, reconcile their views and produce a scientific analysis of society in theoretical work that is at the heart of the party's role. Criticism of the leadership may be seen as essential to maintain the vitality of the party's inner life. The party should incarnate the superior, revolutionary organising principle that rejects bureaucracy and top-down control while not, of course, rejecting differentiation of function.

It is true that in post-revolutionary Russia, by the time of Lenin's death, polemics were possible only inside the party, not outside it, leading to a position where everything depended on the CP and whether it continued to follow a particular path, and the character of its leadership. Other institutions of socialist democracy had been weakened or destroyed. There had been already an under-estimation of the necessity of vigorous life in the Soviets, and the ideas of workers' control, so strong in 1917-18, had been weakened. Of course, these processes had been bound up with the demands of the civil war and famines; it may be possible to show that decisions made on how the civil war was to be fought — made essentially by Lenin and Trotsky — also weakened the development of the revolution. Maybe this was unavoidable; but with the benefit of hindsight one wonders was it necessary to have so many Tsarist officers integrated into the Red Army, or that it be developed so much towards the model of the bourgeois army and away from the partisan-type model.

Deutscher, analysing the rise of Stalinism, laid very important stress on the influence of the isolation and backwardness of Russia at the time; now we are giving attention also to the numerical isolation and relative backwardness of the membership of the Bolshevik Party, which even at the beginning of 1917 before the civil war slaughter was only 30,000. We must also look at Lenin's writing again to discern the party's ability to co-operate with and encourage the work in other autonomous organisations, such as those operating today in the fields of minority super-exploitation and
discrimination, women's liberation, youth, etc. The concept here is something quite different from the organisations that were just old-left "fronts" of the CP's. There should be a genuine relation between the party and other groups and organisations.

A key position in Lenin's concept of the party was that occupied by the militant-activist definition of a member. Lenin insisted that each member should have the duty, not only to support the program, but to be directly active in the discussion, formulation and execution of policy. This was very different from the German social-democratic party of the time and large revisionist parties of today, with huge paper memberships including a mass of passive "sympathisers", a continual burden on the activists who have to service them and usually providing a docile block vote for the leadership when challenged, thus encouraging the emergence of a manipulatory elite. A good revolutionary organisation would be one that combines a militant membership with genuine democratic centralism — full democracy regarding discussion and determination of policy together with disciplined unity in action. Only the mass participation of party members can guarantee democracy in the party, just as only mass participation in the revolution can ensure socialist democracy. But inner-party democracy has point only if the party can act in a united fashion on the basis of collective decisions.

**How do you see the scientific and technological revolution impacting the situation in the working class?**

This seems to me a further development of the productive forces, leading certainly in the capitalist mode of production to new distortions and more acute contradictions. It is true, I suppose, that the changes in the situation in various areas — the media, universities, student revolt and industry — may be linked with the scientific and technological revolution and maybe we need more investigation of the idea of qualitative development in the capitalist structure. However, there is little effect evident, for example, in the expanding services sector and there are limits to the ability of capitalism to integrate the scientific and technological revolution. We have done some work, which is still unpublished, on the role of science in production, but this is a long-term feature of capitalism. It may be that the changes are leading to some rise in accumulation from this source, and having more far-reaching or different effects on the role of man, the worker, in production.

I think too much can be read into the effects of the scientific and technological revolution on the explosion of the higher student population and on student revolt. Most of those involved in the
student revolt come from fields allied with sociology and art, economics to a lesser extent, while science, engineering and technological students are mainly passive. At the same time sociology and art students will mainly become ideologists of the ruling class, social manipulators of one kind or another and capitalism requires that they be taught a little about real social processes. And it's obviously true that the explosion of knowledge feeds into the whole situation. The new social strata are in some ways new sections of the working class but not all are productive workers, and in some ways they reinforce the petit-bourgeoisie. We don't see the new technological strata leading the working class — really they are still part of the forces spontaneously thrown up by capitalism.

How do you rate and conceive "counter-hegemony" in revolutionary strategy?

It is not primarily the cultural exposure of the bourgeoisie. There is too much stress on socialist education. A more adequate concept stresses that it should be built on a new organisational principle for social relations. An analogy is the guerrilla struggles: they represent a new organising principle for society in certain social formations, with the abolition of landlordism, making the revolution by anticipating a new popular power, new kind of army, etc. . . . a new principle of civilisation. In our conditions the exercise of bourgeois power is based more on the cultural moment than on force, by comparison with the semi-colonial and for that matter with Tsarist power (though at the same time the modern bourgeois state has available far superior technology of repression). Hence for us there are different ratios in our struggle. We must engage in more cultural contestation (having in mind that the need for popular force would develop later) . . . and in this connection there is a need to analyse youth culture. It is of course partly integrated — we see already the development in the USA of "hippie capitalism" which is commercial and strongly anti-union — but it also contains elements of new principles of culture, for example the relation between the creator and the audience. The American underground press, too, is a new development marked by close rapport between writers and readers. The counter-culture must be critical and not accept a ghetto-type existence, as displayed by some old left publications and also in a different way by the US underground press.

In the field of politics, we should not come out with "realistic" solutions to capitalist problems, unless there are mass movements which can effectively promote alternative policies — as in the struggle on Vietnam. Otherwise we get away from the struggle and towards integration; top-level programs for structural change
are dubious; only demands for reforms coming from below help the movement.

A genuinely revolutionary movement in modern society needs to generate a radically new vision of society consonant with the highly developed forces of production but critical of their warped form. We see parties, incapable of doing this, insulating their members off from ideological infiltration — a real danger, in their case — and seeking to bind their members to some outrageous theses, creating group solidarity out of collective guilt. Only a genuine revolutionary counter-culture can obviate the trend to excesses of this sort. Potential elements of such a culture are to be seen, I believe, in the world of the underground, despite the mystification around it. Some revolutionary currents in Europe are exploring the possibility that in an advanced capitalist country, a revolution would have to be accompanied by a cultural revolution rather than followed by it. In such an advanced country, the revolutionary militant must break with prevailing bourgeois fetishism and mystification in everyday life, and be culturally integrated with the revolutionary movement — which of course does not mean the puritanism adopted by some on the left, but a genuinely liberating culture.

How do you conceive the role of the New Left Review?

I am speaking for myself, of course. I see it almost exclusively as a theoretical role. The British movement has been sadly weakened by contempt for and lack of theory and this has helped to reinforce the reactionary ruling class culture and hegemony. The NLR was launched at a moment when it was able to attach itself to developing disciplines in which the ruling class had not well worked out its ideology — e.g., sociology — and we hoped, too, to help bring about the internationalisation of the ideology of the British left, by systematically producing material on the Third World movement and the marxist movements in advanced countries. We were among the first to publish works by Franz Fanon and Regis Debray, for example. Later, Marcuse and others.

We tried to relate to the working class movement and the labor movement in Britain but it has been more difficult to develop work in this way among the left. In the student movement to some extent our work has been to seek to explain and interpret the class struggle intelligibly to students predominantly of middle class background. The Incompatibles book on trade unions is really aimed at explaining the unions to those of student background, as part of our interpretation and propaganda work, rather than to clarify strategy. Our broad theoretical and cultural task is to
shift a section of the intelligentsia, which would perhaps have
shifted anyway to some degree under the influence of Vietnam
and the bankruptcy of the dominant British intellectuals. Now we
are more concerned with the question of forging a vanguard grouping,
the strategy and tactics of the movement, and a theory of the
revolution for itself — not just a critique of bourgeois theory.
There is a difference between opening a door to radicalism and
setting out to build a movement. This represents a shift of
emphasis.

The history of the British labor movement has very much
vindicated two of Lenin’s theses — (1) that the working class, left
to itself, will develop only an economistic consciousness, however
militant; (2) that socialist ideas must be brought into the working
class from outside, by revolutionary intellectuals. In the UK, the
working class did its part in developing a militant, economic
consciousness, but unfortunately the early intellectuals fell down
on their role and produced fabianism. Therefore we feel the key
point of intervention in this conjuncture is to create a properly
marxist intelligentsia — what had been lacking. These intellectual
strata may come from the technical intelligentsia or from the
working class — but predominantly it must be from the middle
class whose members have the education and the privilege of time
and facilities to study. But an intellectual for us should be any
real militant of a real revolutionary party, with a proper education.
Taking socialism to the working class in the UK links up with our
ideas on strategy for the development of the revolution in Britain.
There exists a crisis in the hegemonic ideology of the British bourgeoi­
sie, to be accentuated by renewed capitalist competition and the
European Common Market and it has led to extra-parliamentary
movements on the right, including Powellism and, more ambiguously,
national movements in Scotland and Wales, the squatters and
Northern Ireland. This differs from the situation of the past
several decades.

NLR has been half British and half English-speaking, as there
seemed to be a lack of such a theoretical journal in this whole
cultural area — e.g. in the USA. In Britain the NLR has tried
to remain close to political struggles — which has meant mainly
the student movement — and to represent marxist, and now
leninist, ideas within this context. It is a context that has been
somewhat confusing in recent years when some things that appeared
adventurist turned out to be not adventurist at all. Deviations
in the early stage of a movement are more forgivable than those
in the stage of decline. One still has to criticise them but they
are part of the forward development.