Bernie Taft

Testament of George Lukacs

IT WAS ONLY SIX WEEKS AFTER the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the five Warsaw Pact countries. A second Preparatory meeting of communist and workers' parties had been assembled in Budapest to attempt to organise the planned international meeting. The immediate impact of the military intervention on the European communist parties was such that all that could be agreed on at this gathering was to meet again in six weeks.

It was in this atmosphere that I rang George Lukacs at his home in Budapest to ask him if I could have a talk to him. I explained that I was a delegate from Australia to the gathering of communist parties assembled at the Gelert Hotel, and mentioned a common friend who was at the time a leader of a West European communist party. "Certainly", he replied. "I'll be pleased to see you. What about tomorrow morning?"

The next morning, October 3rd, 1968, I spent with George Lukacs at his study which overlooks the Danube. He was relieved when he discovered that I could speak German, the language in which he has written most of his works. He explained that he felt less at home in English. Lukacs was extremely interested in the attitude of the representatives at the Preparatory meeting to the Czechoslovak situation, and questioned me about it.

I took detailed notes of the interview. Lukacs sought my promise that I would not publish this interview during his life. He explained that he had only recently been readmitted into the Communist Party (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) after his expulsion following his part in the 1956 events in Hungary. "They know George Lukacs, the controversial Marxist thinker and theorist of literature and aesthetics, died in Budapest early in June this year. Bernie Taft, member of the National executive of the CPA, interviewed him in Budapest late in 1968. Lukacs spoke frankly to him on some problems of the socialist movement on the understanding that this would not be published while Lukacs was still alive.
my views, but I don’t want to oppose party policy publicly”.

The intervention in Czechoslovakia had upset him greatly. He kept coming back to it during the course of the meeting. “I am strongly opposed to the intervention,” he said, “but I don’t want to be associated with the anti-socialist hysteria. At the same time I also don’t want to do anything which will endanger the economic reforms in Czechoslovakia. However, as a theoretician I reserve the right to express my views. I don’t want to participate in the shouting but to clarify the theoretical questions involved.”

He saw the intervention as a tragedy, but also as a symptom of the crisis of the socialist countries. “The Stalin era and its aftermath have reduced the attraction of communism. Compare the attraction of the Soviet Union today with that of Russia after 1917 when the country was starving. It will take a decade of a correct policy to restore the attraction of communism. Unfortunately the big process of decay of the capitalist system has been counteracted by negative developments in the USSR. As a result of the intervention in Czechoslovakia, Brezhnev has made Nixon President of the USA.”

Lukacs was critical of some trends in Czechoslovakia during the Dubcek period. He spoke specifically about the cult of Masaryk and of freedom of the press.

“I regard the complete freedom of the press and the establishment of a number of parties as false. To approach bourgeois democracy as the alternative to Stalinism is false. This is not the alternative. We can’t go back to the heroic period of bourgeois democracy. Such tendencies existed in Czechoslovakia. They must be overcome. The real alternative to Stalinism is the return to the principles of the Paris Commune, to 1905 and to 1917 to 1921, to workers’ councils built from below. These questions need to be clarified. But I don’t want to criticise the Czechs at the present moment when they are in great difficulties”.

I asked him for his views on the prospects of policy changes in the Soviet Union. He replied: “The future of anti-Stalinist development is very unclear. I must confess that I overestimated the intelligence of the present leaders, I did not expect the intervention. Much depends on whether there is a group inside the leadership which will recognise the danger that the present trend constitutes to the USSR as well as to socialism. But we don’t know the internal situation well enough. These Soviet leaders are apparatchiks, managers. Khruchov was a politician, even if a bad one. But they are not politicians. The intervention has reduced my opinion of them still further. They acted like the most stupid amateurs (die blodesten Dilletanten waren sie). To
In reply to the question as to what he regarded as the main reasons for the intervention, Lukacs said: "The main motive for the invasion was to destroy any opposition. After Stalin's death it became clear that the economic system could not survive without democratic reforms. This is still the big task at the moment. The Russians fear that they will be confronted with a reform opposition. As long as the opposition is confined to artists and writers they can cope with it — they can be locked up. But Sakharov's letter shows that the technical intelligentsia is beginning to rebel. Yet the USSR depends for its position as a world power on the technical intelligentsia. They can't be locked up. The commissars could deal with the old working class, but they can't cope with these people. Let me illustrate this with an example from the last war. Why did the USA succeed in producing an atomic bomb whilst Germany failed? There were two reasons. One, they obtained as migrants from Germany some of their best scientists. Two, in many cases Germany's own scientists did not have their heart in their work. This is nothing new. The USSR can't escape this problem".

Speaking about himself and about some contemporary Marxist writers, Lukacs had this to say: "Official Soviet circles treat me still with great reserve. Generally I am not attacked, but simply ignored. In the German Democratic Republic I am a dead person since 1957."

“I disagree with Kolakovsky but respect him. I don't believe that Marxism itself is in need of revision. Marxist methods must be understood and applied especially in spheres where we are lagging behind, such as political economy. Marcuse and Bloch are utopians, I am a Marxist. Isaac Deutscher was a very intelligent man, but he is very partial to Trotsky. He distorts the relations between Lenin and Trotsky.”

In reply to a question about the lag of Marxism in the sphere of economic theory, he said: "In 1929 it seemed to me that we were witnessing the last general cyclical crisis. They will not recur. It is a new stage. This problem requires to be studied and solved. This has not yet been done. The reason for the new stage — which should also be a new stage in Marxist analysis — is that Marx dealt with machine capitalism. In his time most articles of consumption were not produced in capitalist factories. What little personal consumption there was by the working class was supplied by handicraftsmen. In addition to this we have the
growth of the service industries. These things constitute a structural change in capitalism. Now capitalism depends on the consumption of the working class. It is interested in the worker as a consumer, not merely as a source of exploitation as in Marx's time.

In reply to the question about the prospect for the communist movement in the West, Lukacs said: "I am pessimistic. The fact is that the USSR remains the model no matter what we do."

About the new left he said: "I view it with great sympathy, as the beginning of the opposition to the manipulated society. In 1945 it looked as if the manipulated society would win through. But present development is only the beginning of an opposition, which may take decades to unfold. It is similar to the earlier smashing of machines. It was progressive, yet real development was only possible when a new stage had been reached. The real prospects lie in the long term effect and developments. Here I am critical of the negative attitude of the French Communist Party to these developments. The Italian Communist Party is much less embedded in Stalinism. This is in part a tribute to Togliatti."

I asked him about his views on the earlier hopes and current prospects for destalinisation in the Soviet Union.

His reply was: "I was pessimistic from the start. I said that they wanted to overcome Stalinism by Stalinist methods. They held this against me. But it was true. Stalin reversed the relation between theory and tactics. He put tactics ahead of theory, and created theories to justify tactical needs. Unless we overcome this, destalinisation remains a phrase. Whether one man or whether a collective acts bureaucratically is not the question. The question is whether tactics or theory is primary. Take as an example Stalin's theory of the sharpening of the class struggle. Why did he put this forward? Because of tactical needs at the time of the trials. This is the essential question. As long as tactics are primary we remain Stalinist. Therefore I believe that the return to Marxism is a very important practical question and not only a theoretical question. The Soviet leaders handled the question of Czechoslovakia on the basis of their tactical consideration. This was primary, they produced theories to fit the tactical needs."

I asked Lukacs why in his view the Soviet leaders can't free themselves from placing tactical considerations first.

He replied: "They have been brought up this way. Thirty years of Stalinism, that is what those who are fifty today have had in their life."
He went on to say: “We have lost the real socialist perspective of freedom. We have capitulated before the manipulated society. It is an illusion to believe that the economic advance of the USSR will win us support. Many workers get this under capitalism too. I am all for economic development, but greater consumption does not yet mean greater socialist perspectives. If we don’t admit that we are in a crisis we won’t get out of it. We are going through a period of the darkening of the socialist ideal. Compare Bernstein’s view that the movement is everything, the aim nothing. It is really similar today. We have left socialist perspectives to Marcuse and Bloch. Manipulation is not only a feature of capitalism, there is also manipulation under socialism. Those opposed to manipulation don’t look to the existing socialism as a model. And with justice. It was Lenin who said a long time ago that you can’t deceive classes.

“The return to Marx is an ideological revolution. It is my view that the Czech comrades were not sufficiently critical of non-Marxist views. Take for instance the idea of absolute freedom. This can’t exist. It is simple to say we all need freedom. I go a long way with this. But if there is propaganda for racism, should we allow this? I would use administrative methods in such instances. To say that there is complete equality is nonsense. In 1956 some students asked me to arrange to translate some works of Western philosophers. I said we will not translate indiscriminately. Learn German, if you want to read Heidegger.”

Talking about himself, he told me that he was arrested by the Russians in 1941. “I spent two months in jail. It was through Dimitrov’s personal intervention that I was released.”

Discussing the situation in the communist movement, Lukacs said: “The way out of this terrible crisis is for more parties to return to Marxism. That may yet lead to overcoming of Stalinism. In the Soviet Union itself Yevtushenko and Solzhenitsyn reflect a movement of the people. It can’t be otherwise.”

Lukacs was bitter about manifestations of anti-semitism in socialist countries. He recalled that Engels had called it “the socialism of fools.” He added: “The influence of Israel and Zionism is terribly exaggerated. This too is connected to the priority of tactics. It comes back to this. It serves some tactical needs. But a Marxist would not do this. It is this false priority that leads bureaucrats to do it.”

I asked about his view of the long term prospects in the development of the socialist countries. “It took over 800 years
for feudalism to establish itself. It is now just over 50 years since
the socialist revolution took place. It may take 100 or even 300
years for socialism to develop. We must expect a relatively longer
period of transition than we had expected. It will depend to a
considerable degree on us, on what Lenin called the subjective
factors. I want to contribute all I can to help theoretically in
the renaissance of Marxism. On the other hand it may not take
so long. We must not forget that history takes some big jumps.
I saw the collapse of the Hapsburg and Romanoff empires; they
looked stable and seemed everlasting in their time. Much depends
on every communist being conscious of his task. The reform
movement against Stalinism will be victorious in the long run.
The real danger today is passivity. Revolutionary cadres exist
latently. The Communist Parties must concentrate on these tasks.
We must not make the least concession to Western bourgeois
ideology for fear of being considered Stalinists. I do not make
such concessions.”

About what could happen in the socialist countries if necessary
reforms were not introduced, Lukacs said: “The restoration of
capitalism is very difficult, in fact impossible. Even in Hungary
the basis for restoring capitalism is gone; 1917 can’t be destroyed.
A type of state capitalist system is possible, but we lack historical
experience. I think the transition will take a long time — it is a
sphere where little theoretical work has been done. What the
movement needs today is a common perspective but different
tactics. But the Russians believe that they can continue to lead
the movement, as in Lenin’s day, under their leadership. They
suffer from bureaucratic illusions. The Russians had enormous
authority in the days of 1917. They do not have it today. Just
as the Pope can’t prevent the use of the pill, so Brezhnev can’t
restore the relation that Lenin had with the Communist movement
in 1917.”

This is how Lukacs summed up Stalin’s role in history. “He
had three great historic achievements. One, he brought about the
industrialisation of the Soviet Union. Two, he achieved victory
in the Second World War and thereby prevented a Hitler-dominated
Europe. Three, he prepared the conditions for breaking the
American monopoly of atomic weapons and prevented the American
domination of the post-war world. These three things give him
a lasting place in history. At the same time he destroyed for half
a century the effectiveness of Marxism and socialist perspectives.”

When I said at the end, “Comrade Lukacs, you seem rather
pessimistic.” He replied: “No, I am optimistic for the 21st
century.”