

Why Do I Demonstrate?

1968

On Easter Monday I was in Trafalgar Square: a policeman was counting us as we marched in, moving his lips rapidly in silent figures and then looking down and scribbling the number in his notebook. He seems to have got in the end to 22,000. This was the tenth successive Easter Monday I've been on that demonstration – a demonstration with one continuing theme, against British nuclear weapons, though over the years there have been other themes too, and this year it's been directed especially against the war in Vietnam. In the late 1950s that kind of demonstration was still rare or occasional. Today, in a score of countries, the protest march has become a regular part of political activity. In the past in Britain, as at Peterloo and in the marches of the Chartists, there was a style of demonstration that predated liberal democracy: the march of men without votes representing that majority who were excluded from political decision, and a march through the streets with banners because this was still the quickest and most visible means of communication. Today the means of communication are much more developed. Technically, through broadcasting and television and through low-priced newspapers and books, the communication of opinion is much more widely available, and, in most of the countries where people are now demonstrating, most, though not all, of those marching have the vote and other civil liberties. So it's at first sight surprising to people working within orthodox views of society that this political method should have so dramatically re-entered political life in modern societies, and that it should be especially active in some of the most modern societies in the world. I want to try to explain this, but from the point of view of a participant, not an observer. I think this is crucial, for there's a rich field of study, for any student of communications, in reactions to these marches from what we can call professional observers.

Only a few years ago, the CND Easter March was an occasion for little reports in the bright style of the school-leaving essay, on the Easter ritual, the annual turnout of the naive. I haven't seen any of those this year, though when there's a space to fill they can always be brought out again. What's more common now is the sensational headline about mobs and violence, with 'insights' into the ideology and organization of the new demonstrators. Particular men are built into sinister figures, or are interviewed with that characteristically friendly, open-handed malice. Networks of conspiracy and instigation are dramatically exposed in the manner of the prime minister discovering 'a tightly knit group of politically motivated men'.

This is, of course, only the scum on the front pages of the richer newspapers, but the kind of description it offers, the kind of explanation it attempts, seems to me very similar to many more sober reactions of the kind I hear, for example, at Cambridge. People come and ask me – with a remnant of respect for that kind of eccentricity which has been habitual in the old universities, but with a visibly harder undertone – why I, a writer and a university teacher, should get mixed up with what is now usually called 'that sort of thing'. When I tell them that my wife, in an orderly demonstration against UDI in Rhodesia, was knocked down behind a Cambridge lecture room by a group of young men supporting the Smith regime, they say: 'That's what you must expect if you go on demonstrations. Why not stick to official politics' – the due and proper processes of debate, argument and election?

As a matter of plain truth, most of the people I know who go on demonstrations also spend more time than these others on conventional political processes. They write, organize, canvass, and stand for elections. Certainly, speaking for myself, I've done most of these things repeatedly. This winter, for example, for a long period I put aside one of my own books to edit the *May Day Manifesto*, which involved the intellectual collaboration of men in many disciplines from ten British universities, and which offers a closely argued and contemporary socialist view of the British and international crisis. All that, by the terms of the ordinary reaction to the recent demonstrations, is what one ought to be doing – reasoning, describing, persuading. And yet somehow when it comes to it, it isn't.

For the last ten years – indeed during just the period of the revival of demonstrations – there's been a very active renewal of socialist thought in many countries and in Britain as clearly as anywhere. It's a different socialism, in many ways, from some of the forms which preceded it. It isn't, as yet, a system, but it has certain identifying emphases and positions, which are very close to, and sometimes identical with, the mood and purpose of the demonstrations. Anybody who participates in these

movements knows of this link and these interactions, between theory and practice, between idea and mood. Anybody who takes the trouble to talk to a regular participant with some readiness to listen, rather than simply to ask the usual questions about long hair and violence, can in fact discover this. Yet even people who are normally well-informed go on saying: to the demonstrators, that what they need is some theory, some serious political position; to the theoreticians, that it is all very well, but rather remote and abstract.

Some part of this must be put down to ignorance, some part again to certain real difficulties, for of course there is no single line among the demonstrators, as anyone who was in Trafalgar Square – or in Belgrave Square, as I was, during the trouble outside the German Embassy – can very quickly see. And in the same way, there's no single theoretical line. There are varying emphases, including some bitter controversy, and in important ways the ideas are still being developed. Nevertheless, it is to that general view of the world, a developed view of the present nature of imperialism, of state-supported capitalism and of managed politics, that most of the demonstrations are now practically related, whether on Vietnam and Rhodesia and Greece, on the struggle of the American negroes, on the wage freeze and the attacks on the social services, on the effects of the communication system, as in the demonstrations against the Springer press in Germany. After a certain point, to go on saying that the demonstrators have no serious political ends, or that we're still waiting to see in cold print the detailed arguments that lie behind the slogans, is to incur the very pointed suspicion of bad faith.

Bad faith, I believe, is just what it is – a very characteristic kind of liberal bad faith. I think sometimes that the real right wing in this country, the more active Conservative politicians, know perfectly well what this movement is about, and are simply against it. But the right wing in Britain is itself in any active sense a minority. I'm more interested in the reactions elsewhere – in the body of opinion which still takes itself as liberal. It's been confused by propaganda, which has raised prejudices against demonstrators and against students. But this couldn't happen if it weren't for the confusion that we're all now living in, when a major political tradition, a tradition which taught most of us to think, is under pressure and in crisis, beginning to break up, and when its habits of thought, its descriptions, its categories, no longer enable us to see and respond to what is happening in the very rapidly changing world.

These ten years of British demonstrations began against nuclear tests, and did something to make the public opinion which led to the test ban treaty. They were soon, though, mainly concerned with the bomb itself, and especially with what was called the British independent nuclear deterrent. It's a profound irony, which can explain some of the bitterness

of the marches, that when we took part in electoral politics, supporting Labour in 1964, one of the lines between the parties was just this issue; yet it's the party that won, the party that asked for our support, that now forms the government which has at its disposal, in the *Polaris* submarines, just what we supposed we were working against. It's like the experience of our American colleagues, who saw the last presidential election as involving, in part, a choice between the politics of Johnson and Goldwater on Vietnam. They saw Johnson elected but got Goldwater's policies.

In the early years when the demonstrations started, the bomb in itself was an issue, but behind it there was a political shock-wave – first felt, as always, among the young – from the combined effects of Hungary and Suez: a bitter reaction against imperialism and that lying invasion of Egypt, but also a bitter reaction against established Communism of the kind associated with Stalin, and persisting, though in less terrible forms, under his successors. That combination of responses against the bomb, against imperialism and against an authoritarian Communism was significant and vital, but it's proved very hard to understand for people whose minds are fixed in old moulds. Yet all over Western Europe now, in Japan and the United States, and coming through in different ways in some East European countries, is this active New Left which is at once libertarian and democratic, and also militantly socialist and against capitalism and imperialism.

The history of the sixties has brought certain rapid developments, bringing in the new formative factor of the liberation of the Third World, often by revolutionary means. As the Cold War broke into actual fighting in just these countries, there's been a necessary hardening of socialist involvement, as in the solidarity with the NLF in Vietnam. The layers of this history and of these active responses are still sometimes separate, sometimes awkwardly angular, even contradictory, but the process of development and clarification is now advancing quite rapidly.

The question can still be put: why demonstrate? Here there's another, and crucial, factor: the quality of response, not simply to these major international issues, but to the experience of living in advanced capitalist societies with parliamentary democratic form. This in the end may be the most critical factor of all, for it determines not only some of the important issues but the consequent strategy and tactics. 'This is a democracy' runs the routine answer to demonstrators, with the obvious implication that there's no need to demonstrate. Yet parliamentary democracy has become increasingly formal under the pressures of consensus. It is in some obvious cases corrupt, in that the relation between an elected programme and actual policies can, as now in Britain, be so contradictory as to pass the boundaries of explanation by

circumstance and begin to look like a confidence trick. Moreover, the theory of representative democracy, with all its strengths and limitations, is being itself surpassed in practice by the pressures of modern organized capitalism to channel decisions to many non-elected bodies. And a key role in this replacement of representative democracy is being played by the modern communications system, which is not, and does not pretend to be, democratic at all, except in purely negative ways. When the German students, after the shooting of Rudi Dutschke, demonstrated against a press monopoly, they were taking into the streets, and for their own good reasons, what had been for many years a central part of New Left theory: that in any large and complicated society, the communications system in newspapers, broadcasting and television is a major political institution – in its supply of necessary information, in its capacity to select, emphasize or exclude, and in its power to influence and campaign.

But this institution, most notably in the press yet also to varying degrees in television, is in no sense representative or subject to electoral control, and is, in fact, permanently up for auction to rich men, to the new communications combines, who then claim by simple purchase this immense political power. It just isn't possible, then, to see parliament and its electoral process as having the right to consume and direct all political activity for its own purposes. For parliament has itself conceded many decisive areas of power, in economic planning and in communications, to wholly undemocratic institutions which it is in no way prepared to fight. The measure of the failure of social democratic parties in Western Europe is that by compromising on just those issues, they've excluded themselves from any serious consideration as the means to democracy and socialism. It is in the gap left by that failure that the new movements are being formed.

Demonstration, then, though only one means, is a necessary response to a society of that kind, which builds official opinion on established lines, and which has reduced previous political channels to instruments or diversions. To go out and speak in one's own terms, directly, has become a central political need, and it is, of course, a challenge which the system in the end knows it must take seriously. But need the demonstrations be violent? We must make some distinctions. The last really violent demonstration I went on was across the Rhine in 1945, with what was then called the British Liberation Army. In a world full of actual violence, as in Vietnam, or in the shootings of radical leaders such as Martin Luther King and Rudi Dutschke, it's difficult to use the same word about what are mainly scuffles in the streets. I think we have to remember that violence can be present in an established order where all is superficially calm, just because the reserves of sheer power are effective.

I don't think men who disturb such an order can be honestly charged with beginning violence. But is our society like that? In more ways perhaps than we're prepared to admit. But what I've mainly noticed in recent demonstrations is the frustration of more rational political procedures, breaking out into the streets in an excited militancy and being responded to stupidly. We can measure the degree by the discipline of the British police relative to those of other countries. Even here the situation is under extreme strain, with provocation by a small minority of demonstrators, but also because of the incomprehension of many authorities, who see keeping the peace as keeping their peace, and keeping law and order as keeping their law and order, against the challenge they call, so significantly, 'unofficial'.

It is necessary to say soberly and quietly that the decay and corruption of the political system, and the intolerable violence now actually directed against the poor of the world, will go on being fought by all effective means; and that unless the demonstrations grow into a new and open political movement, that fight will be ugly. Under a strain like this, it's time, not simply for those of us who are demonstrators, who want a new democratic politics, but for the society itself, a society more and more openly based on money and power, to change and be changed.

'You're a Marxist, Aren't You?'

1975

'You're a Marxist, aren't you?' This question would be difficult but not too difficult to answer, if only it ever got asked. But what happens instead of a question is, in my experience, something rather different. There is a kind of flat labelling with this term 'Marxist', which became increasingly common during the 1960s and is now a matter of course. I find, looking into my own experience, that I get described as a Marxist here and there in all sorts of contexts and with all sorts of implications. I looked myself up once in the *Anatomy of Britain* and found myself described as 'the Marxist Professor of Communications' and I thought: 'well, I'm not a professor, I don't teach communications; I don't know whether the first term of the description would be more or less accurate than the others.' Then again, I mix a good deal in what is known in the orthodox press as the extreme Left, which is now composed of many different and in some senses competing organizations. There one very common tactic of argument is to say that somebody is 'not a Marxist', in much the flat way that is used from the other side. Or there is the formulation which has become very familiar (almost as familiar as that famous one from between the wars, 'it is no accident that ...'): the flat announcement that 'this position has nothing in common with Marxism'. Inside the militant socialist organizations, the revolutionary socialist organizations, you hear this kind of argument all the time. People say it to each other about positions which, from the outside, get the one flat label 'Marxist'.

Now it used to be that the political position and the intellectual outlook which I broadly hold were called, with much the same flatness, 'Communist'. One would be referred to as a Communist whether or not one actually carried the party card of membership in the Communist Party or in one of the rival Communist organizations. There was a