Preface

The literature of socialism is lost in the sense that it is unread. At least most of it is, and this book is a report on what I have discovered by reading it.

It is the first account of socialist literature, I believe, since the defeat of Hitler, and certainly the first since the fall of the Wall in 1989. Being a study of a lost literature it has little to say about justly famous books like *Fabian Essays* or Marx's *Capital*. Essentially a literary study, it is neither a comprehensive account of the socialist idea like G.D.H. Cole's *A History of Socialist Thought* nor of Marxism, like Leszek Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* – still less a history of historical events and institutions such as the First, Second and Third Internationals or the October Revolution of 1917 – though, as so often with intellectual history, events keep breaking in, especially when genocide is in question. My object here is distinct. As a literary historian I seek to open doors to a new debate by studying revolution, class and race through largely forgotten texts in the hundred years or so that began in the 1840s, or the age that stretches from Marx to Hitler. This is a study in the unfamiliar. A lost literature is still a literature, after all, whether it survives in books, periodicals or manuscripts, and it is the business of the literary historian to read it.

Texts can surprise, especially when they are unread, and some of my conclusions may look startling. The first history of socialism, for example, a book unmentioned in any account of the subject, thought it a conservative idea. There is abundant evidence, some of which I produce in my early chapters, that socialism was not always supposed to be left-wing – favourable to the poor – whether by its adherents or its opponents. It was not always anti-racialist, what is more, and not always in favour of a welfare state, which was founded by Bismarck and opposed by Engels. What is more, socialism was ardently colonialist. No one who reads the precursors of Marx – many of them Frenchmen of the 1840s – in addition to Marx himself, and no one who reads Ruskin and Morris, or Shaw, Wells, Tawney and Orwell, could imagine otherwise. In fact it is only as recently as the late 1930s, with the sudden emergence of the Popular Front in a dramatic worldwide contest between fascism and communism, that socialism has been widely seen as situated on the Left. As a great American humorist once said, it is better to know nothing than to know what ain't so.

This enquiry, then, is not an act of reverence; as befits the mood of the hour, it is revisionist. In 1992, after the fourth successive Labour defeat in a British general election, Roy Hattersley declared that the day of the sacred cow was done, and it is even becoming possible, at long last, to question

the assumption that Left means virtue or that Right means competence. There has been too much conservative incompetence, and there have been too many socialist crimes, to make it easy to believe any such thing. All that admittedly makes for a perilous enterprise, since political convictions, in practice, are not plainly and simply a form of knowledge like botany or physics. They are more often a mode of self-definition, a claim to be a certain kind of being – caring if Left, competent if Right. In its heyday socialism was above everything a claim to virtue. You were not merely mistaken if you rejected it; you were at best a cynic and at worst a moral defective. A good deal will have to be unthought if, as I hope to show, the socialist tradition was once (among other things) conservative and genocidal, and unthinking can be harder than thinking and far more painful.

Any open-minded account of socialist literature is likely to look like an act of irreverence. But there is one species of reverence to which, as a literary critic, I stand ever ready to plead guilty. I revere texts. Though not a socialist myself, I accept that the great socialist and anti-socialist thinkers of the past century and a half, voluminous and unstimulating as their works sometimes are, still deserve to be attentively read and scrupulously interpreted. That, surely, is why they wrote, and in this book I do them the honour of assuming that they said what they meant and meant what they said. When Marx and Engels publicly advocated genocide in 1849, for example, they did so because they wanted whole races to be killed. They were not ironising, sounding off or showing off. They praised empire because they believed in colonies. Or again, when Labour leaders opposed William Beveridge's plans for a national health service, as he reports in *Power and Influence*, they did so because they were against it and because, as socialists, they believed they had good reasons to be against it. To humanise capitalism, after all, is to preserve it, and subsequent events do not suggest that their fears were misplaced. Socialist governments in more recent years that have set out to dismantle state welfare should not be thought of as behaving in untraditional ways.

In a word, I study texts for what they have to say. If some find that a sadly literal view, I can only reply that literature is above all interesting for what it says, and that if it were supposed to tell us nothing but what we already believed, or wanted to believe, it would have lost all its power to change mankind.

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