RECONSIDERING MARXISM.

by Bruce Jesson.

A NEGLIGIBLE INFLUENCE IN NEW ZEALAND.

This year I have been doing a course on Marxism at the Auckland WEA, and this is the first of a series of articles that has grown out of that course. My aim is to provide as comprehensive an account of Marxism as possible. I will briefly cover the economic, social and political background of Marxism, and its intellectual origins. I will trace the development of Marx's thought, and will explain the main concepts and some of the areas of difficulty. And I will sketch the subsequent development of Marxism: the Second, Third and Fourth Internationals, some of the independent thinkers and schools of thought, through to the disintegration and renewal of the last couple of decades.

The trouble with such a comprehensive approach is that I will inevitably get out of my depth, as I move into the specialist areas of philosophy, economics and history. (Some readers may be able to help me in their particular fields of interest.) Still, I have to take the risk. There isn't much depth of knowledge of Marxism in New Zealand. Its influence has been negligible here. All that we have really had is the dogmatic and unattractive tradition associated with the Russian Revolution. This has deterred a lot of people who identify this tradition with Marxism as such; and has caused many others to immerse themselves in doctrines that often border on the absurd. There is of course much more to Marxism than the codified beliefs of Stalinism and Trotskyism - and a comprehensive treatment of Marxism is the best way of showing it.

A comprehensive treatment of Marxism is also the best way of showing that it has been the only sustained attempt to develop a radical theory of capitalism. Marx is by far the most impressive of the radical thinkers: rigorous, sophisticated, systematic and exhaustive. Marx has dominated radical thought for a hundred years, not because his ideas are necessarily true, but because he defined the problems and provided some of the concepts that have been needed for a critical analysis of capitalism. Marxism has been the framework for a century of discussion, debate and conflict about the nature of capitalism. Even competing political theories, such as anarchism, have been dominated by it. In a sense, Marxism is the self-consciousness of the socialist and communist movements. It is their accumulation of thought and of reflection on experience. Everything about this tradition is open to questioning and doubt. Few of Marx's own ideas survive entirely unscathed. However, Marxism can't be ignored as a body of thought without starting from scratch.

Marxism's negligible influence in New Zealand is more a comment on New Zealand society than it is on Marxism. It isn't just a matter of the radical impulse being weak in New Zealand. It is equally to do with the New Zealand aversion to abstract thought. "New Zealanders reck little of general ideas and great principles," wrote Andre Siegfried in a 1902 assessment of the New Zealand workingclass. This has been an enduring feature, not only of New Zealand society but also of New Zealand radicalism. Our lack of interest in ideas has even in the past been a source of considerable self-satisfaction; activism has been the test of radical commitment, not thought. Marxism of course is a highly abstract and complex system of thought, and could hardly flourish in an environment of colonial pragmatism.

Marx's thought has been known about in New Zealand since at least the 1880s, when William Pember Reeves wrote about it in the family newspaper, the Lyttelton Times. One or two New Zealand intellectuals, such as Willis

Airey and Bill Sutch, have shown some signs of a Marxist influence. But as a rule Marxism has functioned in New Zealand in its other guise, as a philosophy of political action. The relationship between theory and action has always been a problem for Marxism (and I will write about it in more detail later in these articles). Clearly, Marx intended that his thought should have a political impact, but much of what he wrote is too abstract and complex to be of any immediate political use. In practice, Marxist political movements have had difficulty reconciling the conflicting demands of theory and political action. New Zealand is an extreme case where an obsessive and unsuccessful activism has just about cancelled out theory altogether.

Marxism's history as an organised political movement in New Zealand goes back to the formation of the Marxian Association in 1919 and the Communist Party in 1921. That is, Marxism was established here as a by-product of the Russian Revolution - which was a bad sign, because it showed that New Zealand lacked the radicalism and the intellectual resources to establish a Marxist political movement of its own accord. Before the war, Marxism had been one of several influences in the Social Democratic (formerly Socialist) Party and on the leaders of the Red Federation of Labor. In 1916, the Social Democratic and Red Fed leaders helped form the Labour Party, and any Marxist influence was absorbed and disappeared without trace. This left a vacuum on the Left, to be filled in a few years by the Communist Party, and it meant that a Leninist conformity could be imposed very easily in New Zealand. Unlike Europe, or even Britain and the United States, there was no already-existing national Marxism to complicate the spread of Leninism. There were no local Marxist leaders to be won over to Leninism, or discredited, no existing Marxist organisations to be split or absorbed. Leninism had no competitors.

The early Communist Party was established on the fringes - literally - of New Zealand society, in the same West Coast coal-mining communities that a decade or so earlier had nurtured the Socialist Party and the Red Federation. Isolation, hardship and a sense of community generated a class awareness in these townships that was rare for New Zealand. The Communist Party emerged on the Coast out of an environment of solid trade union activism; and this association of communism and militant unionism has continued ever since. The link between the two seems logical enough, but the similarity of Marxism and militant unionism is deceptive. Both use the rhetoric of class struggle: but the strength of Marxism is its sweep and the fact that it is a theory concerned with the whole of capitalist society; whereas unionism, militant or moderate, has a more restricted outlook and a much narrower focus. Trade union activism fosters a grossly simplified form of Marxism, that is often combined with a defensive, disparaging attitude to the complexities of political theory.

Perhaps this partly explains the appeal of Leninism, because it too is an action-oriented, grossly simplified form of Marxism. However, the most obvious attraction of Leninism for New Zealand communists has been its identification with the Russian Revolution. Evidently, the existence of a tangible alternative has fulfilled some sort of emotional need for New Zealand communists - a feeling of certainty perhaps, or even the promise of a utopia. At any rate, loyalty to Russia (or, when the movement splintered, China, Cuba, Albania) has been a dominating feature of New Zealand communism. There was a time when the case both for and against Marxism was argued entirely in terms of the Russian experience. At one of the crisis points in the history of the Communist Party of New Zealand, following the revelations about Stalin in 1956 and the invasion of Hungary, many of its members left - not because they had changed their minds about Marxism, but because they had lost faith in the Soviet Union.

It is tempting even now to interpret the communist experience in New

Zealand from an international perspective. During the decades of Stalin's rule, communism in New Zealand gave the impression of functioning as an insignificant party within a monolithic world movement. Since then, there has been a series of schisms that have seemed very much a matter of competing international loyalties.

Yet in some ways it is positively misleading to concentrate on the Russian (or Chinese etc) connection, because it hasn't made much difference to left-wing activity within New Zealand. The existence of various socialist homelands has provided a focus for loyalty and a bedrock of faith; but the revolutionary experience of these countries is irrelevant to New Zealand. Similarly, Leninism has functioned as something to believe in; but local communists simply ignore those aspects of Lenin's thought (for instance his critique of trade unionism) that they find inconvenient.

Left-wing politics in New Zealand has been derived from a political culture with which we feel much more comfortable - the British. Radicalism in this country draws on a typically-British mix of influences: liberalism and non-conformism, Christian socialism, Fabianism, Labour Party reformism, militant trade unionism with a political gloss. At most, the influence of the main communist powers has disturbed this mix. For instance, in the late twenties and early thirties the Communist Party adopted the Comintern's hard-line attitude to the Labour Party and moderate trade unionism. Subsequently, this was regarded as a particularly damaging experience, but it did have a basis in attitudes that were common at the time. Similarly, in the late sixties and early seventies, the Communist Party went through a phase of anarchistic militancy, in response to the Cultural Revolution in China. But there was a local basis for it too, in the exuberant activism of the protest movement.

The colonial origins of the New Zealand Left have been so obvious as to attract no comment. The bookshelves of older radicals are crowded with titles from Lawrence and Wishart, Victor Gollancz and the Left Book Club - alongside the unreadable tomes from the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow. (The equivalent for some of my generation has been New Left Books.) For the first thirty-odd years of its existence, the Communist Party of New Zealand belonged to a British Empire grouping of communist parties (and at no point in its history has it challenged the link with Britain). In the fifties, it adopted a programme called The New Zealand Road to Socialism which was copied from the British equivalent, The British Road to Socialism.

Australia, with its more industrialised economy, has also been an important channel of left-wing influence. Several of the Red Fed leaders were Australian. The early Communist Party of New Zealand was part of the Australian Party, which continued to play a big brother role up till the sixties. There has as well been a sporadic American influence on the New Zealand Left, going back (again) to the Red Federation and its borrowings from the syndicalism of the (American) Western Federation of Miners.

There is a pattern to all this. The various deficiencies of the New Zealand Left are all related: its obsessive and unfruitful activism; its lack of any capacity for independent thought and analysis; its colonial inadequacy; its semi-religious faith in the various communist regimes. Each of these is a symptom of the local tradition of colonial pragmatism and of the New Zealand aversion to abstract thought.

The particular failings of the New Zealand Left didn't stand out so definitely during the Stalinist era, because the whole of the world movement was smothered by a Russian-imposed conformity. (Even the non-Stalinist

Left had to function in a political climate determined by the vagaries of Soviet policy.) But the monolithic unity of the international communist movement quickly cracked after the death of Stalin. The strains were apparent even in the fifties, with Eastern European philosophers developing humanist interpretations of Marx, and with a mass exodus from Western communist parties after the invasion of Hungary. The national and ideological conflict between Russia and China also began in the fifties; when it became public in 1962-3 it set off a process of disintegration, releasing pressures that must have been building up for decades.

During the sixties and seventies, national communist parties started asserting their autonomy: the best-known examples are those of Eurocommunism, but the most consistent case is just across the Tasman, where the Communist Party of Australia has established a position of complete independence. Other forms of Marxism flourished, mainly Trotskyism to start with, but also the almost-forgotten heritage of Western Marxism. Marxist theory experienced something of a rebirth, stimulated by the efforts of the French communist philosopher, Louis Althusser.

The last ten or twenty years has been, for Marxism, a period of disintegration and renewal. New Zealand has experienced the disintegration, but not much of the renewal.

In 1963, the Communist Party of New Zealand, alone among Western communist parties, decided to support the Chinese party against the Russian. As a consequence it suffered a much greater upheaval than other parties. Its history since then has been one of continual defections and splits. To start with, the conflict was with supporters of the Soviet Union: in 1966 the CPNZ lost most of its trade union influence when the pro-Soviet Socialist Unity Party was formed. Subsequently, divisions appeared among the supporters of Maoism, with the most damaging of these splits occurring in 1970 when the CPNZ lost its entire Wellington District. The Party has been shedding individuals and groups ever since, till it has now reached the state of being one of the smallest of a number of left-wing sects.

This splintering of the Stalinist tradition was parallelled by the appearance, for the first time in New Zealand, of the main anti-Stalinist form of Marxism - Trotskyism. In 1967, the Socialist Action League was formed, and quickly became important in the anti-war movement; and it has since been joined by a couple of much tinier Trotskyist groups, the Socialist Labour League and the Communist Left.

There are about seven or eight left-wing sects operating in New Zealand, and the fratricidal strife - especially among the Maoist groups - has occasionally seemed positively demented. Often, this strife has seemed to be about competing international allegiances more than local differences, and there has been a noticable reluctance to use the situation to establish any measure of independence, Thus, the Socialist Unity Party is notorious for its blind faith in the Soviet Union. Similarly, the various Maoist groups used to compete frenetically for the favour of China, although the situation settled down after the post-Mao leadership in China repudiated Mao and broke with Albania. A group called the Preparatory Committee for the Formation of the Communist Party of New Zealand (Marxist-Leninist) ended up with the Chinese franchise. The Communist Party repudiated both China and its own Maoist past, and transferred its loyalty to Albania. And the Workers' Communist League was left in a position of relative independence, more by default it seems than by design. Trotskyism hasn't had any equivalent Revolution of its own to identify with. (Although the Socialist Action League is an uncritical publicist for Cuba and Nicaragua, and supports the Soviet Union on all issues of importance.)

But the Trotskyist groups all value their overseas connections, and they all rely on overseas parent organisations - for literature, articles to reprint, touring celebrities, and even to some extent for their politics.

If the various communist groups could ignore their conflicting international loyalties, they might find that they actually have quite a lot in common. They are all activist organisations. Most of them are active in the unions. They all campaign around a range of liberal causes. Nearly all support the Labour Party. Their immediate aims, as well as their ultimate goals, coincide on many points. In a more rational political atmosphere, they could mostly operate as different tendencies within the one party.

There is no prospect of them doing anything so sensible, if only because each group has its own history - which includes its conflicts with the other groups. History divides the groups in another way too: each group expresses some era of New Zealand's political history, and this causes something of a generation gap. The Communist Party, the Preparatory Committee and to a lesser extent the Socialist Unity Party all have a flavour of the thirties - especially the Communist Party which is unrepentant about its Stalinism. The Socialist Unity Party has also been marked by the fifties, with leaders like Bill Andersen and Ken Douglas deriving their habitual caution from their experience of the 1951 waterfront defeat. A younger generation of communists is represented in the Socialist Action League and the Workers' Communist League, both of which developed out of the student protest movement at Victoria University in the late sixties (SAL) and the early seventies (WCL). These two groups express the period when world communism was disintegrating, and appear less rigid and dogmatic than the other groups.

Yet across the generation gap, between the elderly and the middle-aged, there is an unbroken tradition of activism, pragmatism and anti-intellectualism. Despite their university origins, both SAL and WCL are absorbed in the day-to-day problems of practical politics and show little awareness of the intellectual ferment that has occurred in European Marxism. Some years ago, Socialist Action took this anti-intellectualism to the extreme of physically transferring its activities and its membership from the universities to the declining freezing industry - 'a turn to the workingclass' I think they called it.

I know from personal contact that some of the people in these groups do have a private interest in political theory, but are diffident about displaying it publicly. It seems that they have made a judgement that there is no audience for theoretical discussion in New Zealand, and that politics in any case is about action. What this indicates is that pragmatism hasn't just been a deficiency of a particular era and of particular groups, but is deeply-rooted in New Zealand society. It also means that anti-intellectualism permeates the New Zealand university system, rendering it incapable of contributing any theoretical content to radical politics in New Zealand.

Well, maybe I am over-stating the problem slightly. Despite everything, there have been flickerings of interest in Marxist theory. Between 1978 and 1981 there were four annual Marxian Political Economy Conferences. The first was exhilarating for many of the participants. It was as though a long-suppressed need was at last being recognised and met. Subsequently the conferences deteriorated - not because of any lack of an audience, but more because the supply of theory dried up. Some of the papers that were presented to these conferences were printed by David Bedggood in Red Papers on New Zealand, which appeared in three volumes and has been the most uncompromising attempt at publishing indigenous Marxist theory so far made in New Zealand.

David Bedggood has also written the only book that has attempted a Marxist

appraisal of New Zealand - Rich and Poor in New Zealand. Unfortunately, it hasn't been a particularly successful book, attracting a scathing review from W.H. Oliver in The Listener, but not receiving any comparable defence from the Left. The problem, I think, is that the book was rejected by the activist Left as 'academic', and by the theoretically-inclined Left as too dogmatic and too close to being a creed for activists. Either way, Rich and Poor in New Zealand has been a victim of New Zealand anti-intellectualism. (I don't intend this as an off-hand dismissal of the book, and will consider it in more detail later in this series.)

In recent years, there has been a noticable increase in interest in Marxist theory, although there is now no organisational expression of it. Little pockets of Marxism have developed in several of our universities - Auckland, Massey, Victoria and Canterbury - largely as an extension of the Marxism that has become fashionable in British, Australian and American universities. The difficulty with a development of this sort is that it hasn't emerged from New Zealand needs, and doesn't have an indigenous Marxist tradition to relate to. Consequently, there is the danger of insularity. It is too easy for indivuals, or even little groups of Marxists, to become pre-occupied with problems that interest them in the international literature, and to remain uninvolved in the politics of their own country. This self-absorption also inhibits contact between Marxists in the different universities - or even within the same university, if Auckland is any example. (The New Zealand Cultural Studies Working Group Journal is about the only attempt at inter-university communication that I am aware of.)

An insular, self-absorbed, narrowly-academic form of Marxism is more likely to vindicate the dominant anti-intellectualism than counter it. The point, obviously enough, is relevance. During the seventies, New Zealanders discovered that their society was much less stable than they had always imagined. Suddenly, our economy was shown to be among the most fragile in the 'developed' world. Traditional political loyalties started to break down. Bigotry surfaced. In 1981, political violence erupted. A process of social disintegration has also been evident during the last decade. Social and racial divisions have become more obvious, aggravated by unemployment. Family patterns have been changing: the traditional nuclear family is becoming more the exception than the norm. Drugs and unemployment have combined to create a definite criminal sub-culture in New Zealand.

Without really being aware of it, we have been living through a time of rapid and fundamental change, especially when compared with the decades immediately preceding it. Unlike earlier periods of change, the country is not moving in any obvious direction - which is perhaps why we haven't really been aware of how fundamental the process is. Taken singly, each of these changes has a straightforward logic. But the combined effect is chaotic and bewildering. Taken together, these changes are just manifestations of conflicts that are basic to our entire society.

None of the political parties has responded with policies that are appropriate to the severity of the country's problems. (Except possibly for the New Zealand Party, and it has responded with centuries-old dogma.) Nor has anything of importance come out of the universities. Apparently, the entire country has been afflicted with a paralysis of thought; which isn't surprising considering the tradition of complacent pragmatism.

It is this situation that establishes the relevance of Marxism, in at least two ways. Marxism is concerned with the development of society as a whole - and therefore corresponds to the scope of New Zealand's problems much better than the fragmented disciplines of the university, such as philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology and history. And Marxism is

a theory of conflict and change, and has as its subject matter the sort of turmoil that New Zealand is currently experiencing. Both of these features of Marxism can be traced to the influence of the Hegelian dialectic. In the modern context, these two features of the dialectic - the concern with the development of society as a whole, and the emphasis on conflict and change - provide a useful intellectual framework for examining a disintegrating and fragmented society such as ours. The novelty of this intellectual framework, in New Zealand at least, is that it is not just concerned with the various processes of change - economic, political, social and cultural - but with their interconnection.

Marxism may not have discovered a political base in this country yet, but it does have the compensation of a definite intellectual role - and no real competitors. This intellectual role is simply a product of the circumstances that affect us, and it will become clearer as the processes of change accelerate. Perhaps the surprising thing about the last decade is not how much change has occurred, but how little. (There may have been some hyperbole in my earlier account of the country's decline. The process so far has been one of deterioration rather than catastrophe.) We have been spared the full effect of our economic debacle by the magnanimity of the worlds' bankers, and this has softened the political and social repercussions. However, Muldoon is now predicting that the world economy will enter a full-scale depression within the next year or two. If he is right, then this country is going to experience a crisis in the fullest sense of the word. In the meantime, there is an obvious need for a theoretical appraisal of the processes that seem destined to result in such disastrous outcome.

This is where The Republican fits into this potted history of Marxism in New Zealand. Publication of The Republican covers the same decade as New Zealand's disintegration. Naturally, the process of disintegration has provided the magazine with its subject matter. More than any other radical publication, The Republican has focussed single-mindedly on a Marxist analysis of the political and economic convulsion that has been dominating life in this country. The main benefit of this is that it has established the beginnings of an indigenous tradition for isolated Marxists, scattered around the country, to relate to.

Sometimes the Marxist nature of this analysis hasn't been noticed, in some cases because there are people who can't recognise a political theory unless it hits them with polysyllabic jargon, but also because the concepts are often buried in the analysis. In this series of articles, I intend writing explicitly about the concepts; which means shifting the emphasis away from New Zealand but will clarify the methodology that I have been using. In one sense, this series will be a vindication of Marxism. But at the same time, I am going to be completely ruthless about it, cutting away the dogma in order to uncover the concepts that have a lasting value.

(This series on Marxism will continue in the next issue with a discussion of the political and intellectual origins of Marxism.)

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the basis of any challenge to the production of surplus value and the capitalist organisation of production, and consequently society, the extent of this organisation goes far beyond the superficial claims made by Awatere and Jesson and their liberal groupies. Does Jesson think he is the only person on the Left to have read 'What is to be Done'? The Left in the trade union movement is nowhere near as ignorant of the need to inject politics into trade unionism as Jesson suggests.

What people actually involved in trying to carry this process out do realise however is that social change is a much greater and more difficult task than the mere propagation of some glorious idea among liberals.

RECONSIDERING MARXISM (2). (Continuing the series on Marxism started in Issue 51.)

DROPPING THE LENINISM FROM 'MARXISM-LENINISM'.

One of the underlying purposes of this series of articles is to intellectually discredit the dogmatic and simplified versions of Marxism that have prevailed in New Zealand since the twenties. This is not of course a novel aim; nor should it prove too difficult. Marxism-Leninism, the creed of dogmatic communism, has already been undermined by the ferment that has been occurring in international Marxism. All that needs to be done is to extend what has already been accomplished to New Zealand.

International Marxism has become increasingly academic over the last few decades, perhaps as a compensation for the loss of political effectiveness. From this distance, it seems as though the student radicals of the sixties have all gone teaching, generating an entire publishing industry and threatening to overwhelm several academic disciplines. Marxism has become a vocation, which no doubt has its drawbacks but has added enormously to its intellectual depth. Basic matters of philosophy and methodology have been debated and dissected, with the dogmatic certainties of Leninism being demolished almost in passing. The authority of Leninism was always political rather than intellectual, and it hasn't been able to withstand either the process of debate or its rigor.

So far this intellectual ferment has largely missed New Zealand. Most of the relevant books and periodicals are unavailable here, and we lack the left-wing culture that is the necessary basis for the development of Marxist theory. Leninism has lingered here, with the various communist groups (SAL, SUP etc) still having the advantage of their overseas connections. There is no equivalent for the independent Left other than the book sellers and the libraries, and they have no interest in obscure and expensive books designed for a minority taste.

Even so, there are signs that Leninism is declining as a creed for New Zealand radicals. For instance, the Workers' Communist League seems to be shedding its Leninist heritage, judging by reports of last year's conference - under the impact of feminism though, rather than through the influence of a more sophisticated understanding of Marxism.

In these articles, I will be doing little more than popularising ideas that have been floating around for a decade or two internationally. Although these ideas are in a sense the most contemporary, they also reach back through the history of Marxism to its beginnings. Much of the recent discussion has been a re-evaluation of Marx. And there has been renewed interest in lesser-known figures in the history of Marxism (Lucacs, Gramsci, Benjamin, Adorno). To simplify things a little, there is a chart on the opposite page that attempts a Marxist genealogy. Following George Lichtheim in 'The Origins of Socialism', the antecedents of Marxism are related to their political and economic origins in the French and the Industrial Revolutions. The direct political influences on Marxism are the egalitarian republican tradition of the French Revolution and the utopian socialism that gripped French intellectual life in the 1830s. And the chart mirrors the growth of European socialism in the Nineteenth Century, and the revolutionary convulsions and the spread of communism in the Twentieth Century.

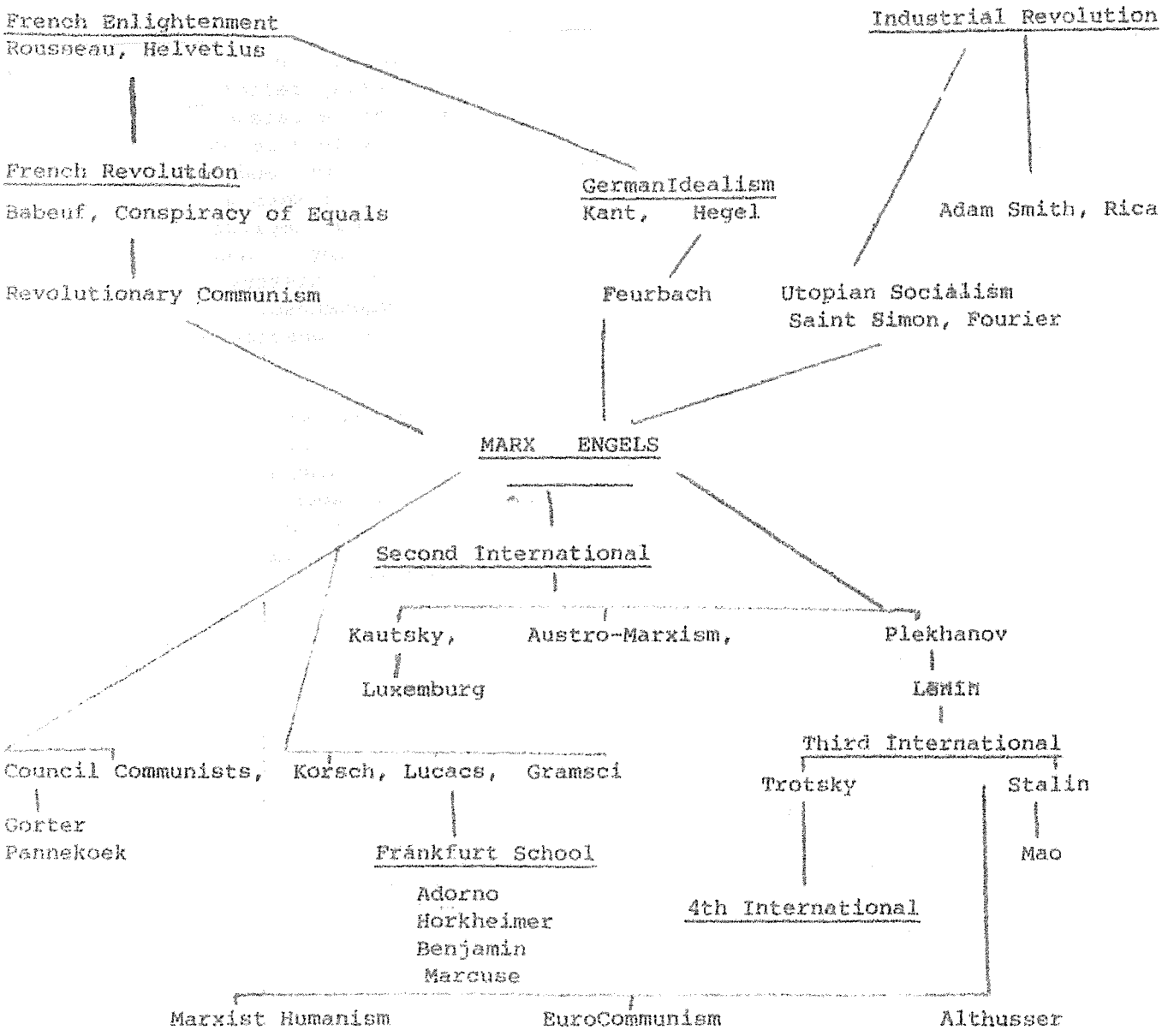
Nevertheless, this is an intellectual outline, not a political one, and the dominating figure (apart from Marx) is someone who was not politically active, nor even a socialist: Georg Hegel, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Berlin from 1818-31.

THE INFLUENCE OF HEGEL.

Hegel's philosophy dominated the intellectual milieu of Marx and Engels' youth, and had a formative influence on both of them, although in different ways. I intend concentrating on the influence on Engels, for my own political reasons. Engels was the person responsible for introducing the philosophy of dialectical materialism into Marxism. There is no statement of dialectical materialism in Marx's work, and it wasn't important in Nineteenth Century Marxism. It was important though in Russian Marxism, and after the Russian Revolution it provided the philosophical basis for the dogmas of communism. Generations of communists have been schooled in this philosophy. Dialectical materialism has made a particularly strong impression on the New Zealand Left because of the fascination with Chinese politics that developed in the sixties. Mao popularised and developed dialectical materialism in his essays on philosophy, and these were accepted uncritically by people in and around the Communist Party and its various off-shoots.

Dialectical materialism still tends to be identified with Marxism in New Zealand, and contributes to its aura of dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. Yet it is widely agreed, among specialists in philosophy, that dialectical materialism is Engels' contribution, not Marx's. And that Engels took it word for word from Hegel. Clearly, there is some untangling to do, because Engels' philosophy is called 'dialectical materialism', whereas Hegel's is an extreme form of idealism. Apparently Engels, and following him Lenin, simply misunderstood the nature of the Hegelian dialectic. Among others, the Italian Marxist Lucio Colletti argues this in 'Marxism and Hegel'. However, this doesn't entirely settle the matter, because Hegel's philosophy has as its theme the goal of Reason and Freedom in human

MARXIST GENEALOGY



This outline of the history of Marxist thought covers the most important names dealt with in this series of articles, and shows some of the connections between them. A diagram of this sort is inevitably selective and arbitrary - someone writing from a different point of view would emphasise different aspects of this tradition.

- Bruce Jesson.

affairs. So long as this goal remains unfulfilled, Hegel will retain a lingering relevance for radical politics.

Hegel's philosophy tends to be incomprehensible to the modern consciousness, if only because the themes are basically religious. At his worst, Hegel is obscure and theological, and can be categorised as some sort of pantheist. That is, he doesn't believe in a revealed god, external to the world. Instead Reason (a synonym for God) is the substance of the world, and the world the embodiment of Reason. Reason exists in space as nature, where it is unconscious and implicit. And it exists in time as Spirit ~~(or~~ Mind, depending on the translation). The essence of Spirit is freedom. The course of history is the self-development of Spirit, its goal of self-consciousness. So that history is nothing more than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.

This appears to be nothing more than theological gibberish, appropriate to a more religious age than ours, and it is treated as such by critics like Colletti. However this is a misunderstanding. Hegel does not rely on religious faith, but on philosophical proofs. Accordingly, the theological exterior of Hegel's system can be peeled away, leaving a rational argument. The world as the embodiment of Reason can be restated as simply meaning that reality has a rational structure. That is, nature is subject to scientific laws; and history isn't just a sequence of unrelated events, but exhibits a rational process - the development of the idea of freedom. Yet Hegel's philosophy remains idealist in the strongest sense of the term, even when stripped of the theological exterior. Reality is treated as an expression of thought, which seems absurd from a matter of fact, materialist point of view. It is simply common sense that the universe exists independently of human consciousness. However Hegel isn't particularly interested in a reality that is external to human consciousness, nor with the natural world as such. His interest is in human history; nature is only relevant to the extent that it belongs to human experience. Within this context, Hegel's idealism is not so self-evidently absurd. History is nothing more than human activity. And the society we live in is a world of our own creation - even if we are unaware of this.

In its theological form, Hegel's philosophy is about an odyssey of Spirit, which is estranged from its objective existence in the world, and whose aim is a reconciliation with itself. In human terms, this refers to the loss of the unconscious harmony that once existed between the individual and society. (Hegel identifies this harmony with ancient Greece; but Maori society could serve as a New Zealand example.) The development of an individualistic consciousness means that we now experience society as alien and oppressive, even though it is only the concretisation of our own activity. Society itself is fragmented into competing interests. And so the goal of history is the return to harmony, but this time at a conscious level, through an awareness that the goals and interests of the individual coincide with those of society as a whole. Hegel intended this as an acceptance by the individual of an oppressive reality. But it could also be interpreted as a call to revolution. (This is the meaning that Herbert Marcuse stresses in 'Reason and Revolution'.) Hegel's philosophy views humanity as historical and history as human. It is a perspective that

has proved fascinating for critics of Western society, and has influenced as impressive range of thinkers: Proudhon, Bakunin, Nietzche, Kierkegaard, Satre . . . .

Dialectical thought is central to Hegel's philosophy in that the odyssey of Spirit - the conflict between human consciousness and social reality, subject and object - is what the dialectic consists of. Hegel develops the dialectic in his 'Logic', where it appears as a dialectic of concepts. One concept (e.g. Being) generates its opposite (e.g. Nothingness), requiring a third concept (e.g Becoming) to resolve the contradiction. Hegel visualises this dialectic of conceptsas unfolding in history - which follows from his view of history as the development of consciousness. Accordingly, the system of concepts doubles as an historical process, there being no rigid separation between philosophical thought and historical reality.

This coincidence between thought and reality provides the bridge to the materialist dialectic that Engels introduced into Marxism. Reality can be viewed as being dialectical by nature, and dialectical thought as being the appropriate expression of this. In this respect, Hegel distinguishes between two ways of thinking which, borrowing from Kant, he calls Understanding and Reason. Understanding is the method of thought of common sense and the natural sciences of Hegel's time, and is roughly equivalent to the positivism that has dominated the social sciences of our own time. Understanding (positivism) works from immediate reality, from the isolated fact and from self-sufficient phenomena. It corresponds to the fragmentation of modern society; unlike Reason which expresses the dynamism of reality, and grasps both the diversity of reality and the underlying unity. This difference can be related to the concept of Totality. Understanding/Reason analyses society piecemeal, whereas Reason understands the parts in relation to the Whole. However the Whole is a process, it is historical, and can only be grasped through a system of thought, not from immediate experience. Consequently the concept of Totality is not just about relating the parts to the Whole. The Whole is a theoretical system; so that the concept of Totality is about the importance of theory as against empirical data or immediate experience.

FROM HEGEL TO DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM.

Engels' attempt to establish a materialist dialectic involved a misunderstsnding about the identity (in Hegel's system) of thought and reality, and of the distinction between Understanding and Reason. Engels discarded what he saw as Hegel's idealism -. the derivation of the dialectic from concepts. In the process, he discarded some of Hegel's most important insights: the crucial role of theory; and the active role of human consciousness in history. Instead, Engels attempted to establish the dialectic empirically, which cannot be done. Universal laws of Being cannot be derived by empirical methods (which is the point of Hegel's distinction between Understanding and Reason).

Engels' discussion of the dialectic in 'Anti-Duhring' is sketchy, fragmentary and little more than an impoverished version of Hegel. Its main problem is the attempt to establish the dialectic as a law of Being applying equally to Nature and human society, to calculus,

physics, barley grains and thought. Engels seems to imagine that these examples constitute some sort of proof, but in themselves of course examples prove nothing. Ultimately the laws that Engels cites are a matter of logic. It stands to reason that . . . .

Engels maintains that change is basic to Being and that movement is a property of matter. The origin of change is internal conflict. Any entity contains within itself its own contradiction, this being the driving force of a process of self development (e.g. the contradiction between Capital and Labour is the driving force within capitalism). Change occurs through a process of negation, whereby one phase of development is superceded by the next.

Engels has been treated harshly by professional philosophers. In particular, the idea of a dialectic of Nature has received scathing treatment. The obvious objection (especially from an empiricist viewpoint) is to the idea of universal laws of Being - which by their nature are beyond the range of human experience. There is also an obvious objection to Engels' assumption that the laws of change are the same for Nature as for human society - or even that the same laws apply to different types of human society. Moreover, many of Engels' assertions appear nonsensical or arbitrary - e.g. the assertion that a grain of barley is negated during germination.

Within the Marxist tradition, the most frequent criticism is of Engels' treatment of Hegel. Hegel was a systematic thinker and his system can't be wrrenched apart without destroying its coherence. The dialectic can't logically be separated from the idealism. (This is the crux of my own argument.) Colletti has argued this point most strongly, by maintaining that the dialectic is integral to Hegel's theology. According to Colletti, Hegel's vision of a dynamic, inherently contradictory reality is intended to demonstrate the insubstantiality of matter and the existence of God. I think that Colletti overstates the case. Hegel's point is that matter cannot be the source of philosophical truth, not that it doesn't exist. Nevertheless, Colletti is basically right, inasfar as the dialectic is very close to Hegel's idea of God. Moreover, Hegel's dialectic of Nature does logically imply some sort of pantheism. Hegel visualises the dialectic as a process whereby an entity strives to achieve its potential. In human society, the driving force of this process is human motivation. But what could this driving force be in Nature, without some divine presence?

Engels' opinions about philosophy merely reflect the breadth of interest of a cultured, Nineteenth Century European gentleman, and are too sketchy to justify much attention. Although Engels' book 'Anti-Duhring' was enormously important in popularising Marxism, the section on philosophy doesn't seem to have had much immediate impact. In Europe, at the turn of the century, it was assumed that Marxism had no philosophy of its own and could be attached indiscriminately to other philosophies. It was only in Russia that Engels' philosophical fragments were taken seriously. There, the idea of a materialist dialectic took off in Hegelian fashion, as though it had a life of its own, developing in a way that would probably have appalled Engels. The initial damage was done by Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism, who coined the term 'dialectical materialism'. Plekhanov systematised

Engels' comparatively haphazard popularisation of Marxism, turning it into an integrated body of theory. Dialectical materialism became the basis of this system, providing the philosophical justification for a theory of the entire history of humanity (historical materialism).

Lenin regarded Plekhanov's interpretation of Marxism as authoritative (despite their theoretical differences), so that Plekhanov's version was absorbed into Marxism-Leninism - the ruling ideology of the Soviet state. In its final form (as outlined in Soviet text books such as 'The Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism'), this ideology is similar in structure to Hegel's philosophy. Reality is assumed to be rational, and governed by universal laws of Being. These laws are the origin of a dialectic of history, moving from a state of unconscious harmony (primitive communism) through various forms of class society, to a state of conscious harmony in a future communist society. Hegel's theological terminology has been discarded, but it was never necessary anyway. And some of the terms have been changed. The dialectic of ideas has given way to a history of class struggle. The conflict between human consciousness and an oppressive society has been replaced by a conflict between the forces of production and the relations of production (in plain language, the level of technology and the property system). Nevertheless, the overall system is substantially Hegelian, and therefore an exercise in metaphysics. And it shares Hegel's basic fault of imposing an arbitrary pattern on human history.

Dialectical materialism has even served much the same political function as Hegelian philosophy, providing a philosophical justification for obedience to an oppressive state. It is because of this political function that Marxism-Leninism became the orthodoxy of the Left for over half a century. It was able to replace less rigid versions of Marxism because of the political authority of the Soviet state, imposed through the mechanism of the Communist International. Conversely, Marxism-Leninism was an essential component of the authority of the Soviet state because of its pretensions as a socio-cosmic creed (a world view). It meant that the twists and turns of communist policy could be justified by the ultimate laws of the universe. And it provided its adherents with that sense of certainty that characterises religious/political movements.

Marxism-Leninism was the creed of Stalinism and its influence today is largely residual. As a theoretical system it is a travesty of Marxism (and even a regression on Hegel). Marx's work was a self-contained theory of capitalism, that depends on no external philosophy of either the universe or history. Many of the insights and much of the complexity of Marx's theory originate in the subtleties of Hegel's dialectic - but it is a more sophisticated use of the dialectic than that of Engels, Plekhanov or Lenin.

However that is a subject for a later article in this series.

The Fletcher Challenge - Wealth and Power in New Zealand is still available from Bruce Jesson, PO Box 22-263, Otahuhu, Auckland 6, for four dollars.

RECONSIDERING MARXISM (3). Continuing the series on Marxism started in Issue 51.

REFORM OR REVOLUTION - IS THAT THE QUESTION?

by Bruce Jesson

In his writings about Nineteenth Century Paris, Marx gives the term 'la boheme' a more indefinite but much stronger meaning than the present use of 'bohemian'. 'La boheme' was used interchangably by Marx with 'lumpenproletariat', to cover "decayed roues with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, . . . ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, . . . vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, litterateurs, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars." 'La boheme referred to those on the margins of society - "the whole indefinite disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither". (1)

Among this disintegrated mass were the professional revolutionaries. Marx wrote about the relationship between revolutionary and bohemenian in a review of a couple of books on the Parisian conspirators: "The development of proletarian conspiracies produced a need for a division of labour. Their members were divided into occasional conspirators, conspirateurs d'occasion, i.e workers who carried on conspiracies only in addition to their other employment, who only attended the meetings and kept themselves in readiness to appear at the assembly point upon orders from the leader, and into professional conspirators who devoted their entire activity to the conspiracy and made a living from it . . . . This class's position in life conditions its whole character from the outset. The proletarian conspiracy naturally offers them only very limited and uncertain means of livlihood. They are therefore continually forced to dip their fingers into the conspiracy's treasury. Many of them also come into direct collision with bourgeois society in general and cut a more or less graceful figure before the police courts. They are impelled into the circles which Paris calls la boheme, by their precarious existence, which in regard to particulars is more dependent on chance than on their own actions; by their irregular life, whose only fixed stops are the wineshops - the conspirators' meeting places; by their inevitable association with all kinds of dubious people. These democratic bohemians of proletarian origin (there is also a democratic boheme of bourgeois origin, the democratic loafers and bar-flies) are therefore either workers who have given up working and as a result have become dissolute, or elements that stem from the lumpenproletariat and carry over all the dissolute habits of this class into their new life. It can be understood how under these circumstances a couple of jailbirds are to be found involved in almost every conspiracy trial.

"The whole life of these professional conspirators bears the character of the boheme most markedly." (2)

This - believe it or not - is Marx's description of French communism, the workingclass republican movement that was descended from the sans culottes of the French Revolution. At its height the French

Revolution generated a social radicalism, associated with Jean-Paul Marat and Jacques Roux; and even a nascent communist movement around Francois Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals. Filipo Buonarroti, a friend and follower of Babeuf's, transmitted communism to Nineteenth Century France, where it generated conspiratorial movements such as Blancqui's Societie des Saisons.

Louis-Auguste Blanqui was the dominant figure of French communism. In Walter Banjamin's opinion, "It is hardly possible to overestimate the revolutionary prestige which Blanqui possessed . . . . . Before Lenin there was no one with a clearer profile in the proletariat." (3)
Marx acknowledged this: "The proletariat rallies more and more around revolutionary socialism, round communism, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of Blanqui." (4) And his derogatory comments about the Blanquist conspirators in the book review were tempered by a tribute of sorts: "It is they who throw up and command the barricades, organise the resistance, plunder the arsenals, lead in the seizure of arms and munitions in homes, and in the midst of the insurrection carry out those daring coups which so often cause disarray in the government ranks. In a word, they are officers of the insurrection."

This conspiratorial milieu formed the background of Marx and Engels' early political involvement. In the 1840s they belonged to a communist sect, the League of the Just later to become the Communist League, which had developed in the 1830s in the large German immigrant community in Paris. This phase of their lives lasted until about 1850. Early in that year, Marx and Engels were involved with the Blanquists Adam and Vidille in a World-wide Society of Communist Revolutionaries. Its statutes stated, "The purpose of the society shall be the overthrow of the privileged classes, the subjugation of these classes to the dictatorship of the proletariat by the waging of permanent revolution pending the establishment of Communism, which shall be the final form of organisation for the human species."

However 1850 was also the year in which Marx and Engels closed down the Communist League, and wrote their book review about the communist conspiracies. This was prompted by internal strife about the conspiratorial and unrealistic nature of communist politics. But a more fundamental reason was Marx's assessment that there was no immediate prospect of revolution, because of the growing prosperity of capitalism. Marx spent the rest of his life studying political economy. When he returned to political activity it was as an organiser of a mass labour movement, not as a communist conspirator.

George Lichtheim argues that Marx ceased to be a communist in the early 1850s and became instead the founder of a form of democratic socialism (5). The revolutionary communist tradition believed in the need for a revolutionary dictatorship in order to establish the common ownership of property. This vision ceased to be relevant in industrial Europe. But the idea moved East to countries that were comparable to revolutionary France, and in particular to Russia, where it was picked up by Lenin.

Although Lichtheim overstates his case, he does have a point. It isn't just that Marx ceased to be a practical revolutionary in 1850. His theorising about revolution mostly dates from then too, and is

dominated by his reflections on revolutionary France. Marx had studied the French Convention during his stay in Paris from 1843-5. And he was especially interested in the process by which a political, democratic revolution spills over into a social, proletarian revolution, which is the stage he thought Germany was at. Lenin and Trotsky were also fascinated by revolutionary France, because of the similarity with Russia, and also because France provided a revolutionary model. But none of this is relevant to the process of change in a complex modern democracy.

AN IRRELEVANT TRADITION?

It might be asked: what has all this got to do with New Zealand? Nothing directly, which is the reason I raise it. Since the importing of Leninism in the twenties, a nominal commitment to revolution has existed on the left-wing fringes of New Zealand politics. This has caused nothing but trouble and confusion for the Left ever since.

Generally, this belief in revolution is nothing more than an unexamined prejudice, derived from the authority of Lenin. Sometimes it is backed by historical arguments ('there has never been an example of a peaceful revolution') but this is theoretically invalid; history never proves anything. Often the commitment to revolution is hedged with qualification: it is conceded that there is a possibility of the revolution being peaceful, with the bourgeoisie being responsible for any violence that might occur. Not that any of this matters too much, because no-one discusses these things publicly, for fear of the ridicule that would ensue.

The Left's commitment to revolution is nominal, inasfar as it is reluctant to actually defend the idea. Yet in other ways the revolutionary ethos still permeates the structure and ideology of the Left. The concept of a vanguard party, disciplined and with a unified will, only makes sense in a revolutionary context. In non-revolutionary New Zealand it has produced an array of futile sects, that exist in an atmosphere of paranoia and secrecy. The damage extends to the Left's rhetoric, which is off-putting for any potential New Zealand audience. And it is embodied in a series of political concepts, such as that the state is the organ of the ruling class. The overall effect is to create little islands of semi-revolutionary consciousness in a sea of mass indifference.

The stock left-wing response to this line of argument is that the revolutionary tradition is international, and not limited by national boundaries. It is certainly true that Marxism is an international political language that crosses cultural barriers, but this is because of the level of abstraction of Marxist theory. It provides a conceptual framework which leaves out of account the cultural differences between communities. (Just as mathematicians, to use an extreme example, can communicate with each other across the cultural boundaries.) However, there are some aspects of Marxism that are not international, but are specific to Nineteenth Century Europe. This applies not just to the revolutionary tradition, but even to some of the terminology. Words like 'proletariat' and 'bourgeoisie' are dated, imprecise and lacking a clear meaning.

It is only recently that the Pakeha Left has aknowledged that Maori politics has its own goals and cultural heritage. There has been no equivalent recognition of New Zealand's identity yet. The Left still insists on acting as though it were part of an amorphous international struggle; which only makes it a foreigner in its own country. SUP conferences are festooned with the banners and icons of revolutionary Russia. The Socialist Action League has turned into a friendship society for Nicaragua and Cuba. Here and there, in places like the Auckland TUC, there are self-conscious pockets of workingclass consciousness that appear totally unrelated to the suburban existence of the New Zealand worker. In practice of course there are no revolutionaries in New Zealand. Everyone makes their compromises, settling either for worthy liberal causes or the routine of trade unionism. All that the revolutionary rhetoric has done is erect barriers: between the Left and New Zealand society; and within the Left itself, between reformist and 'revolutionary'.

Now, I don't want to trivialise the matter. The reformist/ revolutionary argument does involve a basic issue of political theory. Marxism deals with social wholes. All aspects of society are seen as being inter-related; which means that change is seen in terms of a total transformation of society. In contrast, traditional Labour Party pragmatism prefers the apparently more realistic approach of tangible piecemeal change. From a Marxist point of view, such change is necessarily subverted by the surrounding capitalist totality.

However, this theoretical difference has never been debated in New Zealand, and has never in fact been the basis of the division between the reformist and the 'revolutionary' Left. Members of the communist sects are as pragmatic, concrete and linear in their thinking as the non-Marxist reformists. Nor has there been any discussion of how a social transformation might actually occur in a country such as ours. 'Revolutionaries' never consider the process of revolution or what it would consist of. Similarly, reformists never relate their isolated reforms to any definite vision of socialism.

In the New Zealand context, the divisions within the Left have been largely artificial, dating to the splits that occurred within the European Left in the wake of the Russian Revolution. These divisions were to some extent artificial in Europe too, being often engineered by the Russian leaders through the agency of the Communist International. In retrospect, the best that can be said about the revolutionary/ reformist argument is that both sides were right. The reformists said that the revolutionaries would create bureaucratic monstronsities, and they did. And the revolutionaries said that the reformists would sell out; and they always have. The result is the present state of despondency and disarray of the international Left.

In New Zealand, at present, we barely have a discernible Left at all. One of the shocks of this Labour government has been the way that all have collapsed before it: the unions, the Labour Party organisation, the Welfare industry. There hasn't been sufficient socialist consciousness to provide a core of resistance to the trite certainties of right-wing economic theory.

DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS.

Clearly there is some reconstructing to do. It isn't a matter of starting completely from scratch. There are hundreds of people involved in radical politics and thousands more who take an interest. What prevents this radical milieu functioning as an identifiable Left is the divisions that criss-cross it. Common action sometimes occurs, on the various liberal causes, but long-term communication is impossible across the barriers.

It isn't only the 'revolutionary' Left that erects barriers. Labour Party socialists conspire to influence Labour Party affairs, but don't function as part of a wider socialist movement. 'Labour Network' is available to Labour Party members, rather than to the Left as a whole. Many radicals are sucked in by the issue orientation of New Zealand politics, and concentrate on some special interest, peace, ecology or whatever, without participating in any broader movement. In some cases, such as feminist and Maori separatism, the barriers are erected as a matter of principle, with the rest of the radical milieu being regarded as part of the oppressive environment.

In Auckland, especially, radical politics is segmented into a series of self-contained little groups. Some of these groups are influential within the wider context of establishment liberalism. But they are collectively futile as a socialist alternative. Some of them realise this. Efforts are being made to establish common action among the communist sects. However this is too limited, because it leaves the main barrier intact. There would still remain that pointless division between the 'revolutionary' and reformist Left.

Now, I am not so unrealistic as to expect people to cease what they are doing and form a common movement, and it isn't necessary anyway. It would be a sufficient improvement if people just communicated across the barriers. Roger Douglas has at least provided the Left with a common purpose: he has impelled everyone into economics. There is now a widely-recognised need for an alternative socialist economic programme. If handled properly, the process of economic discussion could prove more important than any resulting policy. It could involve such things as joint meetings, the pooling of resources for research, people contributing to each others publications. It could provide the interaction and shared interests that would in itself constitute a socialist alternative.

NOTES:

(1) Karl Marx. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte'.
(2) Karl Marx. Review of Chenu, 'Les Conspirateurs' and Lucien de la Hodde, 'La naissance de la Republique en fevrier 1848.
(3) Walter Benjamin. 'Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.'
(4) Karl Marx. 'The Class Struggles in France.'
(5) George Lichtheim. 'The Origins of Socialism.'