

Marxism Today

An Interview with István Mészáros

*István Mészáros left Hungary after the Soviet invasion of 1956. He recently retired from a Chair in Philosophy at the University of Sussex. He established his reputation in the English-speaking world with his widely translated **Marx's Theory of Alienation** (1970), which was awarded the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize. His work has been particularly well-received in Latin America; and **The Power of Ideology**, his most recently published work, was highly acclaimed both in Britain and abroad.*

*Mészáros's thought is characterised by a fiercely combative Marxism, and a socialist commitment undiminished by recent events. He is currently developing some original ideas about the theory and practice of the transition to socialism. His forthcoming book – **Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition** – will be published by The Merlin Press next spring.*

LUKÁCS

RP: How did you get interested in Marxism?

Mészáros: Amazingly by picking up books in a bookshop, fairly small things like *The 18th Brumaire*, *Communist Manifesto*, and so on, brochures which one could buy for pennies, and then later Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, and later still I got to Marx's major works. At the same time I got interested in Lukács. I found a book of his about Hungarian literature, which I knew; I liked it so much that a week or two later, after reading it, I sold all my precious possessions, like my penknife and fountain pen, to buy his very expensive books. I was about 15 or 16 at the time. After reading those, that was when I decided I wanted to work with him at the University in Budapest.

RP: What was it like when you met him? Was he interesting as a man, or as a colleague?

Mészáros: Very interesting. I started the University in September 1949, and attacks on Lukács had started in July 1949 and they were very savage attacks. I almost got expelled from University because of my frequenting his seminars. In fact at that time the attacks on Lukács were so savage his Institute was almost completely deserted, so he

had a very small seminar only. This went on for two years and in 1951 things had become very dangerous even for him. There was a time when Fadeyev, who was a very old adversary of Lukács's, attacked him in the Soviet Union, and at that point he feared that he might be arrested.

RP: Can I ask you what sort of personal impression Lukács made on you? What was it like to encounter him as a human being?

Mészáros: In this period I got to know him very well, very closely, and I liked not only his intellectual way of approaching problems but also his sense of humour. He had a wonderful sense of irony and I can illustrate it with a story. He told me once that he was in hospital with a stomach complaint, for general investigative tests, and the professor who conducted these investigations, these medical tests, when he saw the X-rays, became very excited and said 'This is wonderful, this is an extraordinarily rare condition, I must show these to my students at the University', and Lukács remarked, 'At last I have become teaching material'; because, in the period between 1949 and the mid-'50s, his books were banned, they were taken out of public libraries and so on, people couldn't even have access to them. This shows he always had a nice story if he wanted to illustrate something. Like on the question of what should be the role of the writer, the intellectual in general: should it be tied to the Party in the way in which the politicians and the ideologues of the Party maintained it should? Lukács's position was no, it shouldn't. This is the difference between the foot soldier of the army and the partisan, the guerrilla fighter. The role of the partisan is to act autonomously. The overall aim and objective may be identical, to win the war, but the way in which one can do it is quite radically different. He was a good man, a man of tremendous moral integrity and a good friend.

RP: What was it like in '56 generally, in the University, in the Petöfi circle, and all this ferment?

Mészáros: As you can imagine it was very dramatic because it was coming out of a period in '55 when Rákosi and company tried to clamp down, quite savagely really, on whatever opposition was coming forward. The Hungarian

Writers' Association was a very influential body that was in the forefront of debates and moving against Rákosi and his clique. In that way it was even anticipating what happened at the 20th Congress in Russia; and as you know in October '56 that's when Rákosi was eventually spirited away: I mean he wanted to refuse to go, and the Russians simply had to drag him away from the country. But then they imposed Ernő Gerő who was very much a Stalinist himself. Then of course events unfolded. '56 October 23rd was the uprising, and November 4th the second Russian intervention, and that put an end to a period of great expectations and hopes in the Petöfi circle. The Petöfi circle grew step by step and when Rákosi authorised it, he made the cynical remark, 'Well we'll let them talk and then we hit them on the head.' It didn't quite work out like that because this talking generated an enormous popular echo and some of the meetings, especially towards the end, were attended by 5-6,000 people.

RP: Did Lukács show any reluctance to take a job with the Nagy Government or was he pleased to do that?

Mészáros: He took a job with the Nagy Government, making it clear that he would do it strictly for a very limited period until things worked out and then he would return to writing, because he was extremely keen to write not only his *Aesthetics* but also the *Ethics* which in the end turned out to be his *Ontology of Social Being*. He was always dreaming about writing an ethical work which in the end he could not write.

RP: Why did you go into exile? Was it in accordance with Lukács's advice?

Mészáros: Neither on his advice or against it. At the time when I decided Lukács was under arrest, but I decided really a bit earlier, at the time of the second Russian intervention, because I became convinced that there was no hope for socialist transformation in Hungary. They repressed what was actually far from being counter-revolutionary. It was a very promising upheaval to start something new, and in no time at all workers' councils were constituted all over the country; the question of turning towards the capitalists was never envisaged.

RP: You have written a lot on Lukács. How would you sum up his historical significance? What's his importance for Marxism?

Mészáros: I consider it very great. He's one of the outstanding philosophical figures of this century and he was a highly successful and important philosopher before he even embraced Marxism. He has written a number of works which no Marxist can ignore and it goes beyond that, because he has in some way theorised the historical experience of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. That is probably his most important achievement as a thinker. While I don't think that *History and Class Consciousness* is his best book, it doesn't mean that in its own place it's not an immensely important, and representative, book in which

this experience, this historical experience, has been representatively theorised.

RP: Do you think there is any influence from Simmel in *History and Class Consciousness*?

Mészáros: A bit of influence from Simmel, more from Weber, and of course more than anything else from Hegel. Under the circumstances it enabled him to work out a historical view of what was going on and how to in a sense pull ourselves up by our bootstraps – a revolution which aimed to be a socialist revolution when the relation of forces was extremely in favour of the other side.

RP: If that isn't his best book which is his best book?

Mészáros: There are several. For instance *The Young Hegel* is an outstanding work. I remember when I was appointed in St Andrews, and T. M. Knox, who was at that time the Vice-Chancellor of St Andrews University, to my astonishment (he was a good Hegelian and certainly Marxism didn't taint him in the slightest) said to me that he learnt more from Lukács's *The Young Hegel* than from all the other books on Hegel put together. It was quite a compliment from a great Hegel scholar.

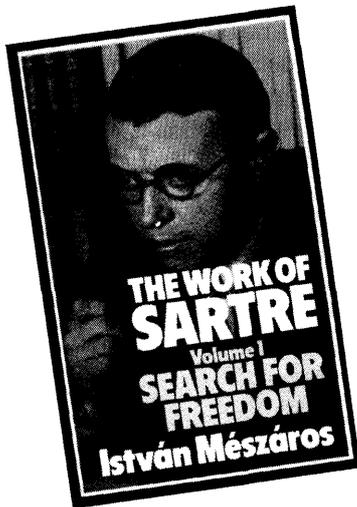
RP: Some people argue that at an intellectual level, because of Hegel's stress on reconciling one to the present, this admiration for Hegel represents Lukács's reconciliation with Stalinism.

Mészáros: I think that would be a very simplifying way of putting it because he was not – as documented through his own history, his own development – he was not at all reconciled with Stalinism. If you like he *survived* Stalinism, that is something quite different. But precisely the book, *The Young Hegel*, shows that it is nonsense to say that he simply reconciled himself with Stalinism, because that book was written explicitly against a Stalinist line on Hegel. Stalin's line on Hegel was that it is an aristocratic reaction against the French Revolution, and Lukács demonstrates that it is an enthusiastic embracing of the French Revolution. In fact there couldn't be even a dream of publishing it in the Soviet Union at the time when Stalin's line prevailed against Hegel.

RP: Was it first published in Hungary then?

Mészáros: It was published in Austria, that's where it was published, in Vienna in '47 and much later on in Germany and also in Hungary. You know he told me the story that in 1941 at the outbreak of the War he was living in a big tenement. The caretaker of that tenement house once stopped him because the Central Committee of the Soviet Party passed a resolution against Hegel, and when you pass a resolution every Party cell has to debate that resolution. The caretaker's Party cell duly debated it and, knowing that Lukács was a professor, he stopped him after this discussion at the door and said 'This Hegel, this wretched Hegel, he should be shot forthwith', to which Lukács replied in his

rather angelic way: 'That would be a little difficult because he has been dead for 110 years.' The fact that the Central Committee of the Soviet Party had nothing better to do at the outbreak of the War than to pass a resolution against Hegel gives the lie to 'Lukács's accommodation with Stalinism'. What *is* problematical in his horizon in that period is that basically he accepted the vision of socialism in a single country. This he maintained to the end of his life, and of course in as much as that was Stalin's political line you have a commonality.



RP: You recently wrote a critical article on Lukács about his inadequacies on the theory of value (in *Critique* 23, 1991). I have just read Lukács's *Process of Democratisation* which he wrote in 1968, which is generally good, but has this incredibly wrong theory of value where he simply identifies value with labour, and surplus value with surplus labour. I was very surprised.

Mészáros: That is very problematical, in fact it's totally unacceptable. And also there you find that the idea of socialism in one country is still haunting him in the background. That is where you have the historical limits of Lukács who was very much in that vision of what happened after the Revolution, that's what he identified himself with. I remember when he was not even a quarter of the way through his *Aesthetics* he was dreaming about writing the *Ethics*. That's what he had wanted to write since 1910 or thereabouts. I was very sceptical. I said to him he would never be able to write it because it is impossible to write a systematic work on ethics without a radical critique of politics. There is no ethical work in the history of philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel which doesn't go hand-in-hand with an equivalent theorisation of politics, and under the conditions of Stalinism, in whatever form, even the form of so-called de-Stalinisation, politics remained a taboo. It was always handed down from above and therefore it was impossible under the circumstances to undertake that radical critique of politics which is necessary, and I said to him that under those circumstances he could only write about the most abstract dimensions and abstract problems of ethics because there is an inherent and integral relationship between ethics and politics. That's what happened because years later when I asked him how the *Ethics* was proceeding he

wrote to me that he couldn't proceed because it became necessary to write a long introduction. At that time he called it an introduction on social ontology, and that long introduction turned out to be a very nearly 3000-page work which is full of references to an *Ethics* to be written. He continued to dream about writing that *Ethics* but for that it would have been necessary to undertake a radical critique of the whole social and economic framework in which politics functioned, which of course he could not do. You have to see the historical limits under which thinkers have to operate. You can't jump out of that, and certainly he couldn't, and it would be very naive to say that this work on democratisation solves the problem in that respect. It came unfortunately too late for him. Today he could do both.

SARTRE'S ALTERNATIVE

RP: You met Sartre in 1957. Why did you decide to write a book on him?

Mészáros: I always felt that Marxists owed a great debt to Sartre because we live in an age in which the power of capital is overbearing, where, significantly, the most commonplace platitude of politicians is that 'there is no alternative' – whether you think of 'Tina', Mrs Thatcher, 'there is no alternative', or Gorbachev who endlessly repeated the same until he had to find out, like Mrs Thatcher, that after all there had to be an alternative to both of them. But it goes on and on and, if you look around and think of how Conservative or Labour politicians talk, they always talk about 'there is no alternative', and the underlying pressures are felt everywhere. Sartre was a man who always preached the diametrical opposite: there *is* an alternative, there *must be* an alternative; you as an individual have to rebel against this power, this monstrous power of capital. Marxists on the whole failed to voice that side. I don't say that you have to become therefore an existentialist or a politically-committed existentialist in order to face it, but there is no one in the last fifty years of philosophy and literature who tried to hammer it home with such single-mindedness and determination as Sartre did: the necessity that there has to be a rebellion against this wisdom of 'there is no alternative' and there has to be an individual participation in it. I don't embrace his ideas but I embrace the aim. How you realise that aim is up to you in the context of your own approach, but the aim is something without which we won't get anywhere.

Sartre today in France is a very embarrassing person even to mention. Why? Because what happened is that in the name of Privatism and Individualism they have totally sold out to the powers of repression, a capitulation to the forces of 'there is no alternative', and that's why Sartre is a terrible reminder. When you also look into the background of the people we are talking about, post-modernists of a great variety, they very often were politically engaged people. But their engagement was skin-deep. Some of these people, around '68, were more Maoist than the extreme Maoists in China, and now they have embraced the Right in a most enthusiastic way; or they were in the 'Socialism or Barbarism' group and have become the peddlers of the most stupid platitudes of post-modernity. What these people

have lost is their frame of reference. In France intellectual life used to be dominated in one way or another by the Communist Party. That goes also for Sartre who tried criticising it from outside and pushing it in a direction which he embraced until he had to come to the conclusion that 'work in collaboration with the Communist Party is both necessary and impossible', which is a terrible, bitter dilemma. He said this at the time of the Algerian War when the role of the Communist Party was absolutely disgraceful. That's what made it necessary, because you need a movement to oppose the repressive force of the State; and impossible, because look what that movement is like. What happened, of course, was the disintegration of the Communist Party like several other parties of the Third International in the last two decades. And with the sinking of this big ship in relation to which all these intellectuals defined themselves in one way or another, here are these intellectuals left behind; the ship has disappeared and they find themselves in their self-inflated rubber dinghies throwing darts at each other. Not a very reassuring sight; and they are not going to get out of it by simply fantasising about some individuality which doesn't exist; because true individuality is inconceivable without a community with which you relate yourself and define yourself.

MARXISM TODAY

RP: You have lived in various countries. Why did you settle in England? Surely English culture is not very congenial to your kind of thought?

Mészáros: Well, I beg to differ because I had actually quite a long relationship to English-speaking culture way before I left Hungary. I had been a great admirer of a certain line of thought from Hobbes to the great figures of the English and Scottish Enlightenment and these really meant a hell of a lot to me, because they had a great message for the future and have to be an integral part of your own work. Another reason was that I was always a great admirer of English and Scottish poetry from Shakespeare to the present. And the third reason which I found equally important is that I always thought of England as the country of the Industrial Revolution which went with a working class with tremendously deep roots, and that remains despite everything. I think you have to relate yourself to something; political and social commitment cannot be in thin air or in a vacuum. I am deeply committed to the working class, and that is how I think of the future intellectually. Theoretically there must be points of reference; there cannot be social transformation without an agency and the only agency conceivable under the present condition to take us out of this mess is Labour – Labour in the sense Marx was talking about and which we have to rediscover for ourselves under our present conditions.

RP: Your most recent book is *The Power of Ideology*. The last part has some interesting criticisms of Marx. What do we have to rethink in Marx's legacy?

Mészáros: Well, we have to relate him to his time which does not mean we have to in any way abandon the frame-

work of his theory. The framework of Marxian theory remains the overall horizon also of our activity, our orientation, because it embraces the whole epoch, this epoch of capital in crisis and the necessity of finding a way out of it. However, historical circumstances change and some of the things about which I wrote in *The Power of Ideology* show that he had to take short-cuts. For well over ten years I have tried to draw attention to this passage in which Marx talks about this little corner of the world. Europe is after all only a little corner of the world. What is it for us socialists, what is the meaning of it, that capital on a much larger terrain, the rest of the world, not this little corner of the world, is in its ascendancy? He decided to put that on the side and proceed from the horizon and perspective of the little corner of the world which Europe was. And that was a conscious choice for him.



RP: In recent papers on socialist transformation, you have introduced an important distinction between capital and capitalism. Can you explain this distinction and its significance for socialist struggle?

Mészáros: Well, in fact this distinction goes back to Marx himself. I pointed out several times that Marx didn't entitle his main work 'capitalism' but *Das Kapital*, *Capital*, and I also underlined that the subtitle of Volume One was mistranslated under Engels's supervision, as 'the capitalist production process', when in fact it is 'the production process of capital', which has a radically different meaning. What is at stake of course here is that the object, the target, of socialist transformation is overcoming the power of capital. Capitalism is a relatively easy object in this enterprise because you can in a sense abolish capitalism through revolutionary upheaval and intervention at the level of politics, the expropriation of the capitalist. You have put an end to capitalism but you have not even touched the power of capital when you have done it. Capital is not dependent on the power of capitalism and this is important also in the sense that capital precedes capitalism by thousands of years. Capital can survive capitalism hopefully not by thousands of years, but when capitalism is overthrown in a limited area, the power of capital continues even if it is in a hybrid form.

The Soviet Union was not capitalist, not even state capitalist. But the Soviet system was very much dominated by the power of *capital*: the division of labour remained intact, the hierarchical command structure of capital remained. Capital is a command system whose mode of functioning is accumulation-oriented, and the accumulation can be secured in a number of different ways. In the Soviet Union surplus labour was extracted in a political way and this is what came into crisis in recent years. The politically regulated extraction of surplus labour became untenable for a variety of reasons. The political control of labour power is not what you might consider an ideal or optimal way of controlling the labour process. Under capitalism in the West what we have is an economically regulated extraction of surplus labour and surplus value. In the Soviet system this was done in a very improper fashion from the point of view of productivity because labour retained a hell of a lot of power in the form of negative acts, defiance, sabotage, moonlighting, etc., through which one could not even dream of achieving the kind of productivity which is feasible elsewhere, and which undermined the *raison d'être* of this system under Stalin and his successors – politically forced accumulation. The accumulation part of it became stuck and that is why the whole system had to collapse. I published in Italy a long essay in Spring of 1982, in which I explicitly stated that, whereas the old US policies for the military-political rollback of capitalism were not likely to succeed, what was happening in Eastern Europe is likely to lead to the restoration of capitalism. I also found for the same reason the idea of market socialism a contradiction in terms, because it would, in a wishful concept, want to wed the two modalities: of the economic extraction of surplus labour with the politically regulated extraction – so that was why it was always a non-starter really.

What is absolutely crucial is to recognise that capital is a metabolic system, a social-economic metabolic system of control. You can overthrow the capitalist but the factory system remains, the division of labour remains, nothing has changed in the metabolic functions of society. Indeed, sooner or later you find the need for reassigning those forms of control to personalities, and that's how the bureaucracy comes into existence. The bureaucracy is a function of this command structure under the changed circumstances where in the absence of the private capitalist you have to find an equivalent to that control. I think this is a very important conclusion, because very often the notion of bureaucracy is pushed forward as a kind of mythical, explanatory framework, and it doesn't explain anything. The bureaucracy itself needs explanation. How come that this bureaucracy arises? When you use it as a kind of *deus ex machina* that explains everything in terms of bureaucracy, if you get rid of bureaucracy then everything will be all right. But you *don't* get rid of bureaucracy unless you attack the social economic foundation and devise an alternative way of regulating the metabolic process of society in such a way that the power of capital at first is curtailed and is of course in the end done away with altogether. Capital is a controlling force, you cannot control capital, you can do away with it only through the transformation of the whole complex of metabolic relationships of society, you cannot just fiddle

with it. It either controls you or you do away with it, there is no half-way house between, and that's why the idea of market socialism could not conceivably function from the very beginning. There is no social production system which can function without incentives, and who are the people to whom these incentives have to be related? Not abstract collective entities but individuals. So if people as individuals are not interested, not involved in the production process, in the regulation of the social metabolic process, then sooner or later they assume a negative or even an actively hostile attitude towards it.

RP: Are we talking about moral or material incentives?

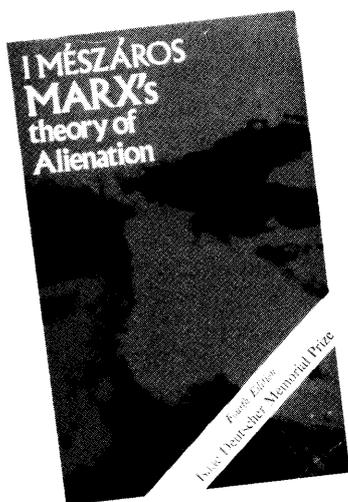
Mészáros: It can be both. The opposition between moral and material incentives is often a very rhetorical one, an abstract and rhetorical one, because, if the results of this intervention and participation in the social processes is a better production, an increasing productivity, activation of the potentialities of the individuals involved, then it becomes a material incentive. But in as much as they are in control of their own life processes, it is also a moral incentive, so the two go hand-in-hand. Material and moral incentives have to go hand-in-hand. It is a question of control of the processes of this social economic system in which the activation of the repressed potential of the people is also an incentive. Material incentives in our society as presented to us always divide people against one another. You can see this everywhere, in every profession, teaching, university, every walk of life: the incentives work on the presumption that we can divide people from one another in order to control them better; that's the whole process. Now if you then reverse this relationship and say that people are in control of what they are involved in, then the divisiveness doesn't work any longer because they are not the suffering subjects of that sort of system. So material incentives and moral incentives can also be egalitarian in character. That is the tragedy of the Soviet-type development. When they talk about the collapse of socialism in relation to that, it's a grotesque misrepresentation of the facts, because socialism was not even started, not even the first steps have been taken in the direction of a socialist transformation whose target can only be to overcome the power of capital and to overcome the social division of labour, to overcome the power of the state which is also a common structure regulating the lives of the people from above.

MICKY MOUSE SOCIALISM

RP: You talk about challenging the power of capital and I wondered if you could say a bit more about the practical implications, the implications for socialist struggle of your distinction between capital and capitalism.

Mészáros: First of all the strategy which you have to envisage has to be spelled out in those terms. Socialists cannot carry on with the illusion that all you have to do is abolish private capitalism – because the real problem remains. We are really in a profound historical crisis. This

process of the expansion of capital embracing the globe itself has been more or less accomplished. What we have witnessed in the last couple of decades is the structural crisis of capital. I always maintained that there is a big difference from the time when Marx talked about crisis in terms of the crisis that discharges itself in the form of great thunderstorms. Now it doesn't have to discharge itself in thunderstorms. What is characteristic in the crisis of *our* time is precipitations of varying intensity, tending towards a depressed continuum. Recently we started to talk about double-dip recession, soon we will talk about treble-dip recession, maybe even one day quintuple-dip recession. What I am saying is that this tendency towards a depressed continuum, where one recession follows another, is not a condition which can be maintained indefinitely because at the end it reactivates capital's internal explosive contradictions with a vengeance and there are also some absolute limits which one has to consider in that respect.



Remember, I am talking about the structural crisis of capital, which is a much more serious problem than the crisis of capitalism because one way to get out of the crisis of capitalism in principle was a state regulation of the economy, and in some respects on the outer horizon of the Western capitalist system you can allow for its possibility. State capitalism can arise when the Western capitalist system is in deepest trouble, but again I would say it's not a tenable solution in the long run because the same kinds of contradictions are reactivated, namely the contradiction between the political and the economic extraction of surplus labour. I'm not talking about fictitious future events – think of Fascism, think of the Nazi system which attempted this kind of corporate state regulation of the system in order to get out of the crisis of German capitalism at that given time of history. Therefore what we are considering here is that all those ways of displacing temporarily the internal contradictions of capital are being exhausted. The world as a whole is very insecure. The overwhelming majority of humanity lives in the most abominable conditions. Whatever happened to the modernisation of these countries? It has taken such forms of robbery and extraction and mindless refusal to consider even the implications for the survival of humanity – the way in which these territories and the population of these territories have been treated – that the whole thing has

been totally undermined, and today you find a situation in which nobody believes any more in the modernisation of the so-called 'Third World'. And that is why that depressed continuum is, in the long run, an untenable situation and for that reason a social transformation must be feasible. But it is not feasible through the revitalisation of capital. It can only be done on the basis of a radical departure from the logic of this accumulation-orientated mindless destructive control.

This tremendous crisis I am talking about saw not only the virtual extinction of the Communist parties, the parties of the Third International, but also the extinction of the parties of the Second International. For about a hundred years those who believed in the virtues of evolutionary socialism, and reform, were talking about the transformation of society which leads towards socialist relations of humanity. This has gone totally out of the window even in terms of their own programmes and perspectives. You have seen recently that the socialist parties of the Second International, and their various associates, have suffered quite devastating setbacks and defeats in every single country: in France, in Italy, in Germany, in Belgium and in the Scandinavian countries, and now recently also in England, the fourth successive defeat for the Labour Party. It was quite appropriate that this serial defeat in all these countries coincided with the celebratory opening of Euro Disneyland because what these parties themselves have adopted in this historical period, in their response to the crisis, is some kind of Mickey Mouse socialism and this Mickey Mouse socialism is totally incapable of intervening in the social process. That is why it is not accidental that these parties adopt the wisdom of capital as an irreplaceable system. The leader of the Labour Party once declared that the task of socialists is the better management of capitalism. Now this kind of preposterous nonsense is in itself a contradiction. It is a contradiction in terms because it is extremely presumptuous to think that the capitalist system would work better with a Labourite government. The problems continue to become more severe, and the political system is incapable of responding because the political system operates under the ever narrowing constraints of capital. Capital as such doesn't allow any more margin for manoeuvre. The margin of manoeuvre for political movements and parliamentary forces was incomparably greater in the nineteenth century or in the first third of the twentieth century. Britain is already part of Europe and there is no way in which you can unwind that process, in the sense that little England will be capable of solving these problems.

But that immediately also raises the question, how do we relate ourselves to the rest of the world? – With what happened in the East, in the Soviet Union? A new fundamental problem has arisen on the horizon. In the case of Russia I read recently that, in addition to the 25 billion dollars which exist in the form of promises from the West, Russia will need this year alone another 20 billion. Where are we going to find these billions which Russia needs for this process when the American debt itself is quite astronomical? The problems of this world are becoming so intertwined, so enmeshed with one another, that you can't think of partial resolutions to them. Fundamental structural

changes are needed. The two and a half decades of expansion after the Second World War was followed by deepening malaise, the collapse of the earlier cherished strategies, the end of Keynesianism, the appearance of monetarism, etc., and all of them leading nowhere. When self-complacent people like John Major say socialism is dead, capitalism works, we must ask: capitalism works *for whom* and *for how long*? I read recently that the directors of Merrill Lynch received, one 16.5 million, another 14 million, and another ten or fifteen of them, 5.5 million dollars each, as annual remuneration. It works very well for them, but how does it work for the people in Africa, where you see them every day on your television screen? – Or in vast areas of Latin America, or in India, or in Pakistan, or in Bangladesh? I could continue and name the countries where you are talking about thousands of millions of people who can hardly survive.

RP: The agent of change in this situation, the revolutionary subject, is still in your view the working class?

Mészáros: Undoubtedly, there cannot be any other. I remember there was a time when Herbert Marcuse was dreaming about new social agents, the intellectuals and the outcasts, but neither of them had the power to implement change. The intellectuals can play an important role in defining strategies, but it cannot be that the outcasts are the force which implements this change. The only force which can introduce this change and make it work is society's producers, who have the repressed energies and potentialities through which all those problems and contradictions can be solved. The only agency which can rectify this situation, which can assert itself, and find fulfilment in the process of asserting itself, is the working class.

THE PROBLEM OF ORGANISATION

RP: What about its form of organisation? Do you think new forms of organisation are needed? Some people say the old-style political party is irrelevant.

Mészáros: Yes, I would completely agree with that. The old-style political party is integrated into the parliamentary system which itself has outlived its historical relevance. It was in existence well before the working class appeared on the historical horizon as a social agency. The working class had to accommodate itself and constrain itself in accordance with whatever possibilities that framework provided and consequently it could produce only defensive organisations. All organisations of the working class which have been historically constituted – its political parties and trade unions have been the most important of them – all of them were defensive organisations. Now they worked up to a point and that was why the reformist perspective of evolutionary socialism was successful for so many years, because partial improvements could be gained. The working-class standards of living in the G7 countries have risen enormously in this period. When Marx was saying in the *Communist Manifesto* that the working class only has chains to lose, that is certainly not true of the working class of the

G7 countries today or even yesterday. They have been very successful in improving their standard of living throughout this historical period until the last decade or so. What happened in the last decade or decade and a half was the coming to the end of this process because capital can no longer afford to grant benefits and significant gains to the working classes. Capital never gave anything away. If it was in tune with its own internal logic of expansion, self-expansion, then those gains could be provided. In fact they became dynamic factors in this self-expansory process. That is not the case now. That's why we are in the situation that the health service is in crisis, the education system is in crisis, the welfare state as a whole is in crisis. So the historical end of this process reopens the question: if the working class cannot obtain defensive gains any longer, through what strategies can it transform society?

RP: What I had in mind is more the extra-parliamentary parties like Lenin's Bolsheviks or the Chinese Communist Party which succeeded in destroying capitalism. Are they historically outmoded?

Mészáros: Yes, completely. Even those parties remained constrained by the perspective of parliamentarianism, and Lenin himself was in favour of these parties operating within the parliamentary framework. So what is of course an immense problem for the historical agency of transformation is that capital is, by definition, and very effectively in its mode of acting and functioning, an extra-parliamentary force *par excellence*. And the working class on the other side has no politically effective extra-parliamentary force. The extra-parliamentary force would be the trade unions, but the trade unions identified themselves with the reformist parties, and that constrained them. There will be no advance whatsoever until the working class movement, the socialist movement, is re-articulated in the form of becoming capable of offensive action, through its appropriate institutions and through its extra-parliamentary force. The parliament, if it is to become meaningful at all in the future, has to be revitalised, and can only be if it acquires an extra-parliamentary force in conjunction with the radical political movement that can also be active through parliament.

RP: What do you think of the current state of Marxist philosophy?

Mészáros: I think Marxist philosophy in general finds itself in a very difficult situation precisely for the reasons we are talking about, because we are in a major historical crisis, and disorientation is the rule of the day and what happened in the East has greatly affected socialists and Marxists in the West and understandably so. It has to go through a process of revaluation and heart searching and redefinition of all kinds of things. I find the situation in Latin America, for instance, much more interesting, the kind of intellectual ferment which is going on there is much more interesting for the time being than what I could point to here. But I don't think this is a permanent condition, and I am the last to suggest that a radical socialist transformation can come out of these areas alone. In fact I am paradoxically convinced

that the future of socialism will be decided in the United States, however pessimistic this may sound. I try to hint at this in the last section of *The Power of Ideology* where I discuss the problem of universality. Socialism either can assert itself universally and in such a way that it embraces all those areas, including the most developed capitalist areas of the world, or it won't succeed.

The world is one. I always rejected the notion of a 'third world': there is only one world. I am convinced that a revival of Marxist thought in the future will also come here in response to the problems and demands of the age – especially when some of the mystifications of the past are swept away. For how much longer can people be fooled with the idea that if they wait long enough then, through social democratic processes of reform and evolutionary socialism, one day their problems will be solved? I don't think that many people believe this today and there was plenty of evidence in the elections all over Europe that this idea has been profoundly discredited. When parliamentary expectations are bitterly disappointed, people move in the direction of taking action. We had a very dramatic case in the recent past with the opposition to the Poll Tax and the defeat of Margaret Thatcher who was considered permanent, undefeatable, through that process. And now, after the British general election, in Scotland people are talking about direct action, even civil disobedience, in order to assert what they consider to be their legitimate interest of securing their own parliament or even their independence. So these are the kind of social events, social movements, in relation to which Marxist philosophy, Marxist thought in general can redefine itself.

RP: Presumably what needs to happen is that the workers in the United States form links and make common cause with workers in the 'Third World'? But how can they? These workers are to some extent living on a transfer of value from these same countries.

Mészáros: This is one of the problems and that's where also a critique of Marx has to be indicated, because the working class itself is fragmented, is divided, there are so many

contradictions. In the United States in the last ten years the standard of living of the working class has gone down. So we are talking about a process, we are not talking about wish objects but realities which are happening in our times. In January 1971 I gave the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Lecture – *The Necessity of Social Control* – and I indicated there the beginning of structural unemployment. Now unemployment at that time in Britain was well under one million. Today, even after 23 times of falsifying the true unemployment figures, it is officially around 2,740,000. And no commitment even from the Labour Party to a return to full employment. That is the measure of the changes that are taking place. It is a massive contradiction when you declare a very large portion of the population superfluous. This portion of the population is not going to remain always meek and compliant and resigned to the conditions to which it is condemned. So things are happening, things are changing. But these changes will have to go deeper and I am convinced that they will.

**Interviewed by Chris Arthur and Joseph McCarney
London, April 1992**

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