



# ALEXEI SAYLE

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BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS

## MOUNTAIN WRONGHOLDISM

I sometimes thought that the worst thing that Marx and Engels had written was that the destruction of capitalism and the triumph of the working class was inevitable. If it was inevitable, this spread the subconscious message that really Communists didn't have to do anything much because the world they wished for was going to come along anyway. They didn't have to adapt themselves in any way to how society was changing, so their ideas, the graphic style of their newspapers, the language they spoke remained locked in the nineteenth century, while they just sort of hung around waiting for capitalism to collapse.

On the other hand if you didn't look too closely it was easy to imagine that the triumph of Communism *was* nearly upon us. The theory of Marxism–Leninism straddled the earth and appeared day by day to be growing. The two largest and most populous nations on the planet, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, were ruled by competing Marxist philosophies. All of Eastern Europe formed part of the Soviet Empire. Communist North Vietnam was about to defeat the

world's biggest and best equipped military complex, the USA. Other countries in South Asia, Cambodia, Laos and North Korea, were solidly Marxist. Ninety miles off the coast of Miami, Cuba bravely challenged the hegemony of the US on its own back patio. Communist Parties in India, Italy, France, the Middle East, the Balkans and most other parts of the world exerted huge influence. In South America Maoist guerrilla groups such as the Sendero Luminoso daily conducted kidnappings and robberies with the support of a large portion of the populace. But at home in the UK despite ideas of socialism and libertarianism being at the forefront of contemporary thought, the notion of a society led by a democratic-centralist Communist Party, whose ideas were based firmly in a true and pure interpretation of the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, was still having difficulty breaking out from its core of a few hundred activists, and one of the principal reasons for that resided at the Bellman Bookshop, 155 Fortess Road, Tufnell Park, London NW5, the national headquarters of the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist).

Left-wing organisations had only about twelve words to draw their names from, including 'workers', 'revolutionary', 'front', 'party', 'Marxist', 'Communist', 'socialist' and 'Leninist', so each group was a permutation of these terms. There was the Workers' Revolutionary Front, the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the Front Socialist Revolutionary League Front and the Communist Workers' Group Front Party League Party. In Liverpool I had originally been a member of a Maoist cell that early on called itself the Merseyside Marxist-Leninist Group, later it had folded into the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), becoming its Liverpool

branch. When I moved to London I automatically became a member of the central London branch which met at the Party's headquarters, the Bellman Bookshop.

In the few hours when it bothered to open, potential customers at the Bellman Bookshop were met with astonishing hostility and aggression. The problem with the shop was that a lot of members of the Party, particularly the ones who were favoured with the role of manning the shop, were socially inept, angry and resentful individuals, the sort who were drawn to radical politics because they had a grievance with the world and were looking to get their own back. If, say, a young apprentice or a medical student came in, interested in Marxism but still with a few doubts, which they expressed via a number of intelligent but sincere questions, their enquiries would be met with querulous replies: 'Why do you want to know this?' 'Who told you to ask that?' 'Are you a police spy?' Soon they would flee from the dark and dusty interior, all interest in Marxism-Leninism extinguished as they resolved instead to join the Liberal Party.

It always struck me as odd, this obsession members of the Party had that inquisitive strangers might be police spies. Surely, I thought, if there were infiltrators in our organisation then they would have learnt beforehand how to blend in, to act like the rest of them, to dress badly and distrust laughter and not draw suspicion to themselves, to quietly and diligently work their way into a position of influence. If there were any police spies in our group then they would be on the central committee. Which turned out to be the case. In fact the only people who truly took us little left-wing groups seriously, who bought into our fantasies of seizing

power in the name of the proletariat, were the various arms of state security such as MI5, MI6 and the Metropolitan Police Special Branch.

It transpired that not only was every one of the revolutionary parties riddled with undercover Special Branch, agents from the intelligence services and part-time police informers (all of them unknown to each other), so were all the central committees of the left-wing trade unions. These men and a few women, in order to maintain their radical credentials, to seem more revolutionary than their non-spy colleagues, needed to pursue highly confrontational policies (though often the people they were trying to impress were other police spies). Therefore a lot of the militant trade union tactics and revolutionary nonsense, thought of as typical of the era – confrontational strikes, pointless occupations, massive and impractical wage demands, petulant walk-outs – were in fact the work of the security services and Her Majesty's Constabulary. Maybe the Arts Council, the Royal Institute of British Architects and the National Theatre were also riddled with police agents, which would go a long way to explaining their avant-garde and seemingly incomprehensible output.

And the senior London members of the CPB (M-L) weren't much nicer to actual members of the Party, especially if they came from Liverpool. The people at the top were always suspicious of comrades from Merseyside. We were thought to have too independent a spirit, to be unwilling to unconditionally accept whatever message was handed down from the central committee. The Mao-inspired term they used when referring to members of the Merseyside branch was 'mountain strongholdism'.

The leader and founder of our party was Reg Birch, who was also general secretary of the Engineers' Union. Reg was a little man, an angry, self-taught intellectual whose pronouncements were often gibberish, but which many in the Party and the broader trade union movement treated as containing profound wisdom. So well was he thought of in left-wing circles that Reg became the first and last Maoist member of the then immensely powerful general council of the Trades Union Congress – the TUC.

In the 1950s, Reg had found Khrushchev's post-Stalin Soviet Union too easy-going and tolerant, so instead he expressed strong pro-Chinese sympathies, and for these he was expelled from the Communist Party of Great Britain. He sorted out that problem by founding his own party following the Maoist line. From then on, Reg was often either in the Irish pub – the Boston – over the road from the Bellman Bookshop, drinking with navvies, or in Tirana, the capital of Albania, drinking with the President Enver Hoxha. Of all the many little Maoist parties in the UK that competed for Communist China's favour and sponsorship we were definitely their preferred choice. The journalist Terry Pattinson was on a visit to Shanghai in 1979 when a Chinese building worker asked him, 'Do you know Reg Birch of the Engineers' Union in England? We are told he will be Prime Minister, after your revolution.'

Reg was a typical revolutionary in that all he really cared about was the revolution, which, he said with relish, would be 'ugly, protracted and bloody'. Like many in radical politics it was chaos that he really wished for: unhappy with happiness, he wished for havoc instead. He had only a vague idea of what

the subsequent workers' paradise would look like and indeed I had the sneaking suspicion there was a good chance that if somebody like Reg ever gained power in Britain then turmoil would be permanent.

Not all the members were such misfits. The co-founder of the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist–Leninist), Bill Ash, was a much more interesting and sympathetic character. He was a man who embodied the nobility, decency and bravery of those who were attracted to left-wing ideas and practice in the 1930s. He was cool too, tall and handsome with a languid Texan charm, and it was said he was one of the models for Steve McQueen's character in the film *The Great Escape*. At the beginning of the Second World War Bill had walked over the bridge to Canada and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, something that cost him his US citizenship. Shot down over the Channel in his Spitfire in 1942 and captured by the Germans he was then imprisoned in Stalag Luft III from which he constantly tried to escape. Bill was actually in 'the cooler', being punished for a previous break-out, when his comrades made what came to be known as 'the Great Escape', and so he avoided being shot on capture on the direct orders of Hitler.

After the war Bill got an MBE, was awarded British citizenship and read PPE at Oxford. He then joined the BBC. Fuck knows what he was doing in our party. He was brave, handsome and didn't seem mad at all.

Bill's wife, an Indian woman called Ranjana, was much closer to the model of a proper Marxist–Leninist: humourless and steely-eyed, she was our foreign affairs expert. One Saturday a group of four of us, including Ranjana, who was dressed in a sari, went to Southall in west London for a meeting with the

Indian Workers' Association, a Maoist group we were hoping would merge with our party.

It was a weird experience for me, visiting an English suburb which was identical to every other – 1930s semis interspersed with parades of local shops – apart from the fact that all the inhabitants were from the subcontinent of India and the shops overflowed with mangoes and bright red peppers, sacks of rice and two-gallon drums of clarified butter. We were crammed, the four of us from the CPB (M–L) and about ten Indian men, into a front room already overflowing with ornate furniture, brass ornaments and red flags adorned with hammers and sickles. I wasn't paying much attention to what was being said, being more focused on all the exotic snacks laid out before us. I had never seen samosas, pakoras, mango chutney, raita and bhajis before and was cramming as many of them as I could into my mouth when one of the Indian comrades, who resembled an illustration of a 'wily Pathan' from one of the comics I used to read when I was a kid, asked Ranjana with a glint in his eye, 'Comrade Ranjana – you say that the Chinese government is the friend of the revolutionary working class.'

'That is correct, comrade,' said Ranjana.

'Well then can you please tell us in that case why the Chinese government is selling guns to the Indian government and the Indian government then uses these guns to kill the Naxalites [an Indian Maoist armed group]?'

Of course the truth was that China had its own pragmatic foreign policy objectives, which sometimes included supporting troublesome guerrilla groups on the territory of their rivals and sometimes didn't, but Ranjana couldn't say anything so nuanced, since Communism only ever entertained a narrative

that was simple and heroic. Instead Ranjana thought about this tricky question for a minute then finally she said, 'Comrades, the Chinese sell the guns to the Indian government so that the Naxalites are able to steal them!'

Apart from a few engineers Reg brought with him, a lot of the Party members were young men and women, either students or professionals in teaching or the social services. I would look enviously at the nubile females listening rapt to Reg's tortured, mangled pronouncements and think that if you were a gnarly old bloke who smelt of fags then starting your own party was a really good way to get young people to revere you. In the normal world there was no way in which these young and pretty twenty-five-year-olds would pay any attention to somebody as weird and creepy as Reg Birch, but here in the sphere of radical politics his fans were as devoted as if he'd been a fashionable Cockney photographer or the handsome lead singer of a pop group.

The one thing I did for the Party was use my free travel pass for the tube that I got as the son of a railwayman to go every Friday night to a lithograph place in Walthamstow and pick up the printing plates for the Party's terrible newspaper and deliver them to the bookshop. They never showed any gratitude.

Apart from that I tried to arrive as late as possible at the weekly branch meetings of the CPB (M-L) held at the Bellman Bookshop and would always position myself right at the back near the door. Unfortunately this tactic, designed to not get me noticed, carried a certain amount of risk. Seated at the rear on the outer fringes of the meeting I would suddenly hear

the door crashing open behind me, followed by the sound of somebody knocking over a dusty pile of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* This would be Reg returning drunk from the Boston or after some trade union meeting or back from Albania. Everybody would turn towards the noise and our chairman, ignoring the agenda, would then launch into a Fidel Castro-style, two-hour-long declamatory speech about whatever was on his mind, leaning on the back of my chair and in effect using me as a pulpit. All the while, as the members looked in my direction, I had to appear to be fascinated by what he was saying as our leader's spit rained gently down on my head.

But if those meetings in London were difficult, when I returned to Liverpool to see Linda I would attend my old branch and that too was problematic because my mother had become a Maoist and joined the Party. In the last year when I'd still been in Liverpool we'd begun holding the CPB (M-L) meetings at our house in Valley Road. I think this was because some of the members in the north end of the city resented having to travel to the south to our leader's flat in Liverpool 8 so our house in Anfield was midway. Throughout the meeting Molly would lurk outside the door with a tray of biscuits trying to eavesdrop on our secrets. Once I left Liverpool to go to Chelsea, my mother crossed the threshold.

Of all the weird things Molly had done over the years this was in many ways the oddest though it has to be said she was also better at being a member of a political party than I had ever been. Not in the sense of bringing about any of the aims of the organisation but rather in the day-to-day conspiring and undermining that people in that kind of group went in for. The leader of the Merseyside branch was a guy called

Ian Williams, a tall redhead who had once been a Liverpool University student but had been expelled for political activity and now worked on the buses with Harry Jackson. Ian absolutely hated my mother and was driven almost as crazy by her as I was. The feeling was mutual but Molly, being adept at manipulation, proved very good at making alliances with others in the branch who also didn't like Ian – those such as his very bitter ex-girlfriend who he'd left for the rich girl with the bourgeois-guilt issues. The leadership in London were also wary of Ian Williams because of his suspected mountain strongholdism and pretty soon Reg Birch was hearing my mother's name spoken of with approval though he still didn't know who I was even though he'd been using me as a pulpit for over a year.