

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT

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RECENT renewed interest in the 'environment' in general, and in the 'built environment' in particular, raises afresh numerous issues: agricultural policy, population growth, housing, transport, pollution, and the whole destructive wastefulness of the capitalist economy. As capitalism slips further and further into decline, there is much here which demands of the working class movement that it formulate with ever greater clarity both its alternative socialist strategy, and its immediate campaigning demands.

It would be well, though, to remind ourselves that these are not by any means new problems for the labour movement: the reactionary theme of 'population pollution' has been one which socialism has contended with at least since the time of Malthus; nineteenth-century radical thought from Victor Hugo to Kropotkin was much concerned with restoring a proper balance between town and country; and the Utopian socialists, Owen and Fourier, regarded their new forms of human settlement as the mould in which the new society could be cast. The most potent ingredient in British town and regional planning is still (in spite of recent backsliding) that which stems from these Utopian beginnings, and develops via 'arts and crafts', 'municipal socialism' and the 'garden city movement'.

We should remind ourselves also that the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels has been no less involved. It was Marx himself who led the rout of Malthus, and Engels who, while warning against the pitfalls of Utopianism, drew approving attention to the Utopians' aim of limiting the size of the town and reuniting town and country. In Book One of *Capital* will be found several footnotes quoting approvingly from Liebig on the 'natural laws of agriculture', and a discussion of that most 'modern' of topics—ecology. In a footnote to the chapter on capitalist accumulation, Marx comments that 'for a century and a half England has been indirectly exporting the soil of Ireland, without giving its cultivators any means for returning to the land the constituents of which it has been deprived.' And in the

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This article is the first of two dealing with the 'environmental question', and is concerned primarily with town planning. In our next issue, Pauline Robinson will be writing on 'An Ecological Look at Environmental Planning'.

chapter on large-scale industry he writes:

With the constantly increasing preponderance of urban population aggregated in the great centres, capitalist production increases, on the one hand, the mobility of society, while destroying, on the other, the interchange of material between man and the soil, that is to say the return to the soil of its constituents that are used by human beings in the form of food and clothing—a return which is the permanent natural essential for the maintenance of the fertility of the soil. Thus it simultaneously destroys the physical health of the urban worker and the mental welfare of the rural worker. But, while thus destroying the natural and spontaneously developed system for the circulation of matter from the soil to human beings, and from human beings back to the soil, it necessitates the systematic restoration of such a circulation as a regulative law of social production, and its restoration in a form adequate to the full development of mankind. . . . Moreover, every advance in capitalist agriculture is an advance in the art not only of robbing the worker, but also of robbing the soil; every advance in the fertility of the soil for a given period of time, is simultaneously an advance towards the ruin of the permanent sources of this fertility. The greater the extent to which a country tends to start its development upon the foundation of large-scale industry (as does the United States, for instance), the more rapid is this process of destruction.

It is no accident, however, that the only work of Marx and Engels to deal at any length with 'environmental' matters is that of Engels on *The Housing Question*. For the urban working class this was and has remained a central issue, along with wages, hours and conditions of work. Official housing policy over the whole period of modern industrial capitalism could itself be taken as a measure of the political health of the working class: cramped and shoddy building, high rents and overcrowding representing weakness; improved standards, lower rents and higher housing production representing strength. There is no more eloquent contrast here than that of the recent past: compare the pre-fabs, new towns and council housing resulting from the victorious mood of 1945, with today's Tory legacy of high rents, reduced standards and housing shortage.* Although the whole question (especially of building societies, mortgages and home ownership) would now bear a fuller investigation than Engels found necessary, there would seem to be no reason for the labour movement to change its long-standing central demand for more and more publicly-owned housing at lower and lower rents.

But even as they affect the urban working class, the problems of 'environment' cannot be confined to houses and rents. Indeed, any attempt to deal with these will sooner or later bring in train other

* For a useful account of recent experience in 'urban renewal' see *Politics and Land Use Planning: The London Experience*, Stephen L. Elkin, Cambridge University Press, 196 pp., £4.

questions: Where are the houses to be? What other things should be built with them? How are they to be grouped? How are they to be served with water, power, transport? What will be the consequences for agriculture, mineral extraction, industrial location, rural conservation and urban renewal? In the developing socialist countries these are already being tackled as vitally important policy matters, and much will be learnt from their achievement. But Britain's experience remains unique. She is the most urbanised country in the world, and the first to experience the modern industrial conurbations. While it needs no more than the experience of everyday life in Britain to know how small has been the success of those who have set out to plan our cities and control their growth, there is much worthy of study in the ideas about town and regional planning that have developed here over the past century.

Regional planning, and the impact of the city upon the total environment, is too wide a topic for a short article, but it raises in general the whole question of social production and of population distribution *vis-à-vis* natural resources, touched on in the passage from Marx quoted above. Here, the excessive concentration in south-east England and the Midlands, and the corresponding depopulation and decline elsewhere, keep alive the popular demand for regionalism and decentralisation, especially as this affects investment in new roads, power stations and towns. But we must beware the deceitful twist capitalism gives to these slogans. Such decentralisation as we have so far got has resulted effectively in the spreading out of existing conurbations over wider areas, adding still further to problems of water supply, communications and rural conservation—to say nothing of economic and cultural imbalance. And 'regionalism' is today the banner under which really *local* government is threatening to disappear.

On the more confined issues of the urban environment and its impact upon the town dwellers, the deficiencies of capitalist policy are only too apparent, and the socialist alternative is (in a word) socialism. Without the fundamental change in ownership and the whole direction of social production away from private profit and towards social well-being, there can be no lasting remedy. But we face the immediate problem of combating harmful policies while campaigning for the positive alternatives, some of which are to some extent realisable even within capitalism.

Recent urban redevelopment has been directed towards the intensification and extension of 'central areas' at the expense of inner suburbs. Multi-storey office blocks and supermarkets have replaced

homes, modest professional 'chambers', and whole streets of little shops. At the same time, there has been a shift from factory to office employment. The inevitable result is traffic congestion as workers and shoppers from ever-wider catchment areas throng in ever-greater numbers into central areas. The primary aim of urban transport policy has been the accommodation of the automobile, and this has resulted in still further 'urban renewal' to replace homes with roads, in the run-down of public transport, and the replacement of what still remained of the traditional, human, pedestrian scale in our towns, with the super-human scale of the motorway and the skyscraper.

Progressive thought among town planners has long been opposed to these policies, and (as the obvious bankruptcy of official policy becomes more and more apparent) the mobilisation of popular support behind it may now bring some positive results. It is necessary to realise that the large scale of modern industry makes it unlikely that the large city will disappear. The problem therefore is to break down the sprawling conurbation into what has been called a 'constellation of neighbourhoods' each element of which should provide an environment adequately served with local facilities, compatible with the pedestrian scale of everyday domesticity, and linked via an efficient transport system to employment and other centres too vast to be contained within them. Where this pedestrian scale still survives, as in the older parts of many towns, it should be defended. The starting point for all policy should not be the motor-car, but the pedestrian—especially the very young and the old—moving about his or her daily business from home to school or shop, or from home to the public transport system which (as no one now doubts) will have to take most of us to work. The popular base of local government should be at the truly local level of the neighbourhood, and a determined effort is needed to demand the setting up of the neighbourhood councils permitted in recent legislation. At the same time, we must keep a wary eye on those who, if unopposed, will seek to turn popular demands for better public transport and improved local identity into policies for herding the under-privileged into class and racial ghettos and pricing the working class motorist back on to an inadequate bus system and out of the way of the managing director's Rolls.

Technically—especially in terms of transport systems—much remains to be learnt before every aspect of new policies like these will be clear. But there is no doubt that the time is ripe for the working class movement to give a lead to the many sporadic civic

societies and conservation groups which already receive wide support, but which, without working class involvement, are always in danger of degeneration into ineffective cliques for the defence of the *status quo*. It is necessary, too, to rescue town planning from current official tendencies which seek to turn it away from its humanist and socialist roots towards a soulless, technical exercise, intended to promote the interests of the monopolies against every other section of the population.

INFLATION

Pat Sloan

‘ONE man’s meat is another man’s poison,’ says an old adage. And this nowhere applies so well as to capitalist society. ‘Unemployment up . . . shares up.’ We’ve had it all before, and the latest sensational example was on January 24. Then, just when all the media were crying ‘crisis, crisis’, and echoing the establishment’s appeals for a tightening of belts, just at that moment the stock exchange experienced a boom which the *Sunday Times* (January 26, 1975) described as the ‘biggest one-day rise ever’, while in the preceding three weeks share prices had already risen by almost 50 per cent. Or, as the *Economist* put it on February 1, 1975: ‘Investors on the London stock market are 73 per cent richer than 24 days ago . . . the sort of lurch that makes the ordinary anti-capitalist regard the stock exchange as a casino.’ (Incidentally, it is not only ‘ordinary anti-capitalists’ that feel like this, for in his day the arch capitalist economist, Lord Keynes, also likened the stock exchange to a casino.)

This synchronisation of high unemployment and high share prices is not new. It is part of the ugly face of capitalism: while workers are in fear for their jobs the smug shareholders sit on their backsides and watch their share prices rise without lifting a finger—unless to sell.

But why did it happen just now? The media have been rounding up opinions, and, though they vary, one anti-red thread links them all. On January 25, 1975, the *Times* explained the boom as being because ‘the government and the TUC will stand firm on wage inflation and uphold the social contract.’ Not one word—of course—on profit inflation and it is to be hoped that workers will note the profitability to shareholders of the ‘social contract’.