Down and Out in London: The Common Market Dilemma

"At the close of the Middle Ages, a sombre melancholy weighs on people's souls. Whether we read a chronicle, a poem, a sermon, a legal document even, the same impression of immense sadness is produced by them all. It would sometimes seem as if this period had been particularly unhappy, as if it had left behind only the memory of violence, of covetousness and mortal hatred, as if it had known no other enjoyment but that of intemperance, of pride and of cruelty."

J. H. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages

If the querulousness which future historians will detect in the British bourgeoisie these last 20 years lacks the *fin du siècle* grandeur of the emotions evoked by Huizinga, it nonetheless has the same pre-eminence in a period of inexorable decline. Most crooks need masks; every state must have its alibi for actions taken. In Britain, the trouble has been that the old masks and trusted alibis have failed in their normal, comforting role.

Every month brings its harbinger of ruin in a period afflicted by unsteady currency, contracting markets, outdated institutions and mass unemployment. In February 1971, in the solemn tones reserved for a major cataclysm, the bankruptcy of Rolls Royce was announced. It is difficult to describe the resonance Rolls has for the British. It stood for splendid engineering, the emblem of conspicuous yet dignified consumption and, in a more central way, for "craftsmanship." Widows on fixed incomes, scions of the upper classes, some of the Rolls work-force—investors everywhere had their money in RR. Then, suddenly, it was in the hands of the receiver. The great triumph of the '68 contract to supply RB-211 engines to Lockheed had turned to disaster. The middle classes then found themselves in a dreadful dilemma. Common sense dictated that the new Conservative government nationalize Rolls Royce, renege on contractual commitments as rapidly as possible, and generally bustle about picking up the pieces. Conversely, however, ideology demanded that "government stay clear," and, as stated in the Tory election manifesto, let the weak and unworthy go to the wall. Furthermore the clearing banks and City financial institutions, from whom RR had borrowed enormous sums, were infuriated since they had been led to believe that their own loans were to be backed up by a government subsidy of $360 million to RR. It was the government's welshing on this commitment that led to the final crash. In this atmosphere of acrimony and despair, it was predicted that 200 subcontractors to RR would go broke, and 80,000 workers would lose their jobs.

In a sky as black as this, every trivial portent becomes a symbol. Late last autumn a furtive exchange took place in a rural saloon north of London. The documents that "passed hands" (as the police say) had not been filched from the dwindling pile of British defense secrets: rather they represented a pessimistic civil service inquiry into the affairs of a major insurance company called Vehicle and General. For a number of years it has been possible for British insurance companies to operate their business in a state of criminal laxity. Assets legally required to be shown bore little relation to the computed weight of future claims. In the case of Vehicle and General, the Board of Trade (the relevant civil service department) had finally accumulated enough evidence to confirm the direst of predictions. V&G went into liquidation. It speedily emerged that leading shareholders (including a former chairman of the Conservative Party) had unloaded prior to the crash. It also emerged that it had been an open secret in the City for years that V&G was "an unwise investment proposition" (i.e., run by incompetent rather than competent ruffians). Finally it emerged, and is still emerging, that the tip-off to the scandal came from the Board of Trade itself.

The totem that is tottering in this case is the awe in which the British civil service is held. Jokes about "red tape" and bureaucrats notwithstanding, there is a profound belief in the integrity and high-mindedness of the civil servant. Known surprises, like the spy Philby, came almost as confirmation of this conviction, since it is evident that he too had integrity, but merely invested it in the services of a foreign instead of a domestic department. Very different is the realization in the case of V&G that civil service departments give information about citizens to credit agencies, about commercial inquiries to anxious investors, and contracts not solely to the lowest bidder.

Bankruptcy and decline . . . there are illustrations of the British decline and fall on every level, from the comical to the immense. Every couple of months one or other of the two leading salesrooms in London becomes swollen with members of the aristocracy and upper middle class. With the subdued eagerness of an 18th century public hanging, the crowd throngs

by Alexander Cockburn

to attend "a great sale." Amid a reverential hush, the bidding is opened at 200,000 guineas. Vaulting up by sums of 50,000, the auction proceeds into an empyrean of riches. A million guineas . . . a million and a half. On and on: up and up. In this manner two English Lords, the Earls of Radnor and Harewood, have recently disposed of Velasquez and a Titian to American millionaires.

Quite suddenly it is assumed that *England* is being deprived of these treasures, so long and so quietly moldering in some country hall. The government is urged to act, to outbid the bidder and "save" Velasquez or Titian for the country. The Titian picture in question, sold to J. Paul Getty for a million and a half guineas, has been loitering around English mansions since 1800. Previous to that it was owned severally by the Duc d'Orleans, an Italian cardinal, Queen Christina of Sweden, the Governor of the Netherlands, and was originally painted for Philip II of Spain by a citizen of Venice.

Whence therefore the anguish? There are thirteen other Titians in British galleries, and Getty had promised to keep the picture in England for two years. The reason is the picture's symbolic status. The fact that by 1966 U.S.-financed firms owned 7.2 percent of the net capital stock of companies in Britain, accounted for 10.5 percent of total sales in manufacturing and, in 1965, for 17.5 percent of manufactured exports seems to lack, for the bourgeoisie, the same brute immediacy of a picture leaving after 170 years' residence. For it, the beauty of the picture lay more genuinely in its historical status as a commodity than in any incidental felicities achieved by Titian within the four sides of the frame. And worst of all, there isn't the simple luxury of hating U.S. imperialism and J. Paul Getty; the most ardent customers for pictures acquired by the British in the late 18th century, at the birth of empire, are no longer Americans, but the Japanese. Not Getty but Akio Morita of Sony; not the Mellons, but Toyota's Shotaro Kamiya.

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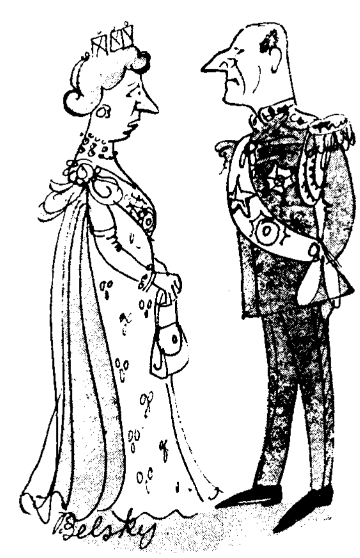
IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO ASSUME that the querulousness of the British bourgeoisie is born entirely of nostalgia for a world that is gone. Of course there are always those people who wish the pound was worth what it was in 1914, and that an English viceroy still rode on an elephant's back down the main street of New Delhi. Britain still is an imperialist power, as the occupants of Malaysia, or of the Gulf States, or of Hong Kong will concede. But increasingly Britain has become victim of a structure that was once its strength. Its international financial interests, its maintenance of sterling as a reserve currency reposed on international confidence (of bankers and investors) and its domestic economic strength. Yet domestic strength, in the form of promoted growth, with political buttering in the form of welfare and social benefits, at once raises the spectre of inflation, causes severe pressure from the central banks, a throttling back of growth, cuts in social benefits—in the interests of a sound balance of payments and the virility of sterling.

Every British government since the war has capitulated before these pressures. And lately the crisis has become much more severe. A couple of statistics give some of the evidence. From 1950 to 1954 the share of profits in the national income was 25.2 percent. In 1969, it was 14.2. From 1950–54 the rate of profit on capital employed was (post-tax) 8.1. In 1969 it had sunk to 3.2 percent.

This sorry state of affairs has not passed unnoticed by the British property-owning class. There are numerous reasons for the catastrophic drop in profits: stagnant growth, high interest rates, flight of capital to more profitable investment overseas. Yet one reason alone has been selected and inflated to gargantuan proportions: the industrial aggressiveness of the working class. From 1964 to 1969 the share in the national income taken by the working class increased dramatically. So also did the incidence of working days lost through strikes. It is true that many of these gains have been swallowed up by enormous price inflation, but the fact remains that the British ruling class believes itself to be afflicted with an organized working class of menacing militancy.

It is somewhat beside the point to adduce comparative international statistics of industrial militancy. (It is actually the case that in days lost per 1000 persons in Mining, Manufacturing, Construction and Transport in 1969, for instance, Italy led with 4110, the U.S. followed with 1390, and Britain came third with 510. Averaged over a decade ('60–'69) Britain came ninth, equal with Finland, with 250 days lost. It is beside the point because neither British capitalists nor British workers were overly influenced by the international league tables. What happened from 1964 to 1971 was an alteration in the political complexion and status of the Labor movement.

The accession to power in 1964 of the first Labor government for 13 years kindled hopes in two very different social groups. It was the optimistic hope of the amorphous entity known as the Labor movement that the Wilson regime would inaugurate some elements of socialist change, however minimal; the backbone of this movement—the trade



'Philip, what's a 9 per cent increase on £475,000, in Eurodollars?'

unions who actually pay for the Labor party—hoped at the least that the Parliamentary Party would be a tacit ally in its economic struggles with management. Conversely it was the hope of certain sections of the City bourgeoisie that Wilson would implement his electioneering rhetoric and "in the white heat of the technological revolution" reforge Britain's economic cast, promoting growth, throwing out the old structures and ringing in the new.

Both parties were disappointed. Wilson had hardly laid aside his tailcoat and top hat after an inaugural trot to Buckingham Palace before he had responded to a severe run on the pound by all the traditional deflationary measures, curtailing social benefits, and finally succumbing to financial orthodoxy. The rise in working-class militancy, allied with somewhat more energetic trade-union leadership, was a double response.

THE LABOR PARTY HAS ALWAYS BEEN an alliance of the unions and an autonomous middle-class outfit calling itself the Parliamentary Labor Party. By 1968 the fissure in interest became definitive. Impelled by the frantic urgings of the middle class and the graver pleas of the international bankers, the Wilson administration opened a campaign to reduce by legislation the militant potential of the unions. The actual legislative bundle is by now a familiar feature of many advanced capitalist countries: no unofficial strikes, no sympathy strikes, a compulsory "cooling off period," and so forth. The miscalculation was not in its appeal to the middle class, but in the strength of the opposition it aroused in the working masses. By autumn of 1969 Wilson had lost—enough of his own party in Parliament had come to believe that tranquil pursuit of political self-interest demanded that, for once, they "heed the call of the great Labor movement" and turn tail with decent speed.

Their period of repose was rudely and conclusively disturbed in the summer of last year. Against a backdrop of consistent militancy, of falling profits, but a sound balance of payments; through the agency of working-class abstentions, the middle class turned to greet Tory Edward Heath, a new saviour at the head of an old party.

With great speed the Heath administration re-introduced anti-working-class legislation, in the shape of the Industrial Relations Bill. Viewed in perspective it may seem that the fight that has been conducted against this legislation has not been impressive. There was no General Strike—not even a call for one by the Unions. There were two one-day strikes by up to 500,000 workers around the start of the year. Yet it is an indication of the comparative stability of advanced industrial capitalism in Britain that this phase of struggle, from late autumn to the spring of this year, seemed of unparalleled energy. But still, so far as the I.R.B. is concerned, the struggle seems to have failed. The Conservative Party, with the tacit support of most of the Labor Party as well, has fulfilled its promise to try to curtail industrial militancy. But even if no counter-measures from the workers are forthcoming, this bill will scarcely cure the ailment of British capitalism, although an apocalyptic occurrence, which supposedly will, has been laid before the British people—entry into the Common Market.

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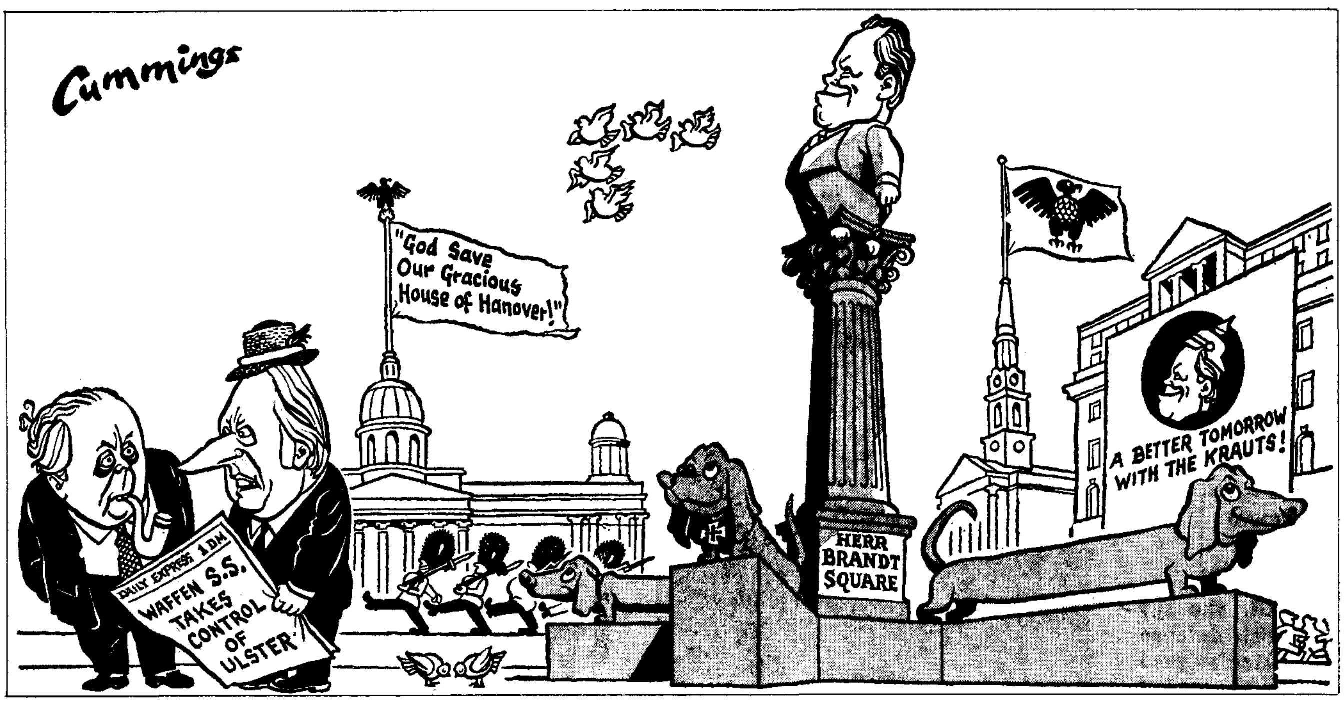
THERE IS NOTHING MORE COMICALLY disgusting than the sight and sound of a nation self-consciously pronouncing itself to be on the brink of a great decision. The only rule is to remember that, the more sordid the actual venture proposed, the more banal and wretched the rhetoric enveloping it. Current British speechmaking on the topic of the Common Market uniquely combines the worst elements in the public styles of Kennedy and Churchill: "We point to the future, not to the past. We seek cooperation in prosperity, that we may find prosperity in cooperation," etc., etc.

The Common Market, it should not be forgotten, is ex-



actly what it says. After the resurrection of the West European economies after the war, through the Marshall Plan, it became plain that the major productive forces were in danger of being strangled if confined behind national frontiers. The practice of economies of scale, the enormous costs of research and development in such areas as nuclear physics and computer technology, the accession to sufficient markets could only be achieved if in some manner the tariff walls and national economic policies separating West European countries could be superceded. Furthermore, increasing dominance of U.S. firms within the Common Market (composed, to date, of France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg) could only be contested by the cooperation of capital on an international, not a national, scale. (In this context it should be noted that in 1965, 80 percent of Common Market computer production, 24 percent of the motor industry, 15 percent of the synthetic rubber industry and 10 percent of the production of petro-chemicals was under the management of American subsidiaries.)

In no sense has the development of the Common Market since its inception in the early '50s meant the obsolescence of the nation-state. So far the "Community" has been a careful and occasionally explosive balance of competing national interests—the desire of West Germany for peaceful commercial expansion; the aim of the French to interdict U.S. dominance from their situation of elabo ate state planning and relatively weak capitalist institutions.

It was of course De Gaulle's suspicion of British complicity with U.S. interests that led him to veto Britain's entry at the end of the '50s. Indeed it is certainly true that a powerful section of the British dominant class believed until the mid-'50s that the "special relationship" with the U.S. more than outweighed the advantages of entry. Since then, however, it has been the express policy of every British administration to join.

From the point of view of large-scale enterprises Britain *has* to join. Its traditional markets, under the Commonwealth preference system, have been rapidly eroded. Between 1958 and 1965, while British exports to the Commonwealth were increasing by 30 percent, those to the Common Market grew by 113 percent. The sterling area is no longer the sure resort for British exports it once was. In 1953 the sterling area received 47 percent of Britain's trade; in 1966, 31.4 percent. In 1966 no less than 47.8 percent of Britain's trade went to Western Europe including the Common Market countries. More and more, Britain's aviation industry, motor industry, electrical, textile and rubber concerns only make sense in a European context.

No less unpleasant than the dreadful sentimentality of phrase used by those in favor of joining has been the chauvinism of that element of the British bourgeoisie opposed to the venture. Their vocabulary is entirely of the past, and devoted to the most frenzied nationalism. "Do we wish to go in with Krauts, Frogs and Wops?" "Will the Queen be 'phased out'?" Simultaneously a grave responsibility to the Third World—systematically exploited by Britain for 200 years—is discovered: "Britain has a role beyond the narrow confines of Europe," etc.

BUT THE TRUE COST OF ENTRY will be borne not by the middle class, but—in higher prices, and reduced room for organized union maneuver—by the working class. Common Market protection of the interests of French dairy farmers will mean that on entry Britain will have to accept the higher food prices prevalent inside the Market. Food prices will rise by at least 15 percent over the next six years. Furthermore, the share of wages relative to profits may fall, as investment is diverted to more lucrative enterprises on the continent.

Thus, the main use of the British working class for the Common Market countries will be in terms of cheap labor, of which there is a chronic shortage now. In every country in the Six, shanty towns house underpaid, non-union labor from Algeria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Spain, Portugal, southern Italy. Beneath the labor aristocracy in each country they are victims of this industrial free-fire zone. Britain at the moment has 800,000 unemployed—the highest number out of work since 1940. Already Scottish ship-workers are being exploited in Hamburg, in Bremen; dislodged from a setting in which, over 100 years, some bargaining power has been laboriously acquired, they are back in the role of poor, non-organized laborers in the 19th century.

Beneath the rhetoric, the Common Market is precisely this: an institution created by capitalists for their own benefit. The great, current debate in Britain is therefore an entirely false one so far as organized labor is concerned. It must be said at the same time, though, that the at least nominal adherence of working masses to the mildewed emblem of social democracy extant in Britain has left little room for counter-action in the advocacy of a socialist alternative.

It is almost certain that Britain will join. From there the "Community" will be faced with two options: to liberalize the Market and allow total *laisser-passer* to U.S. capital, or to strengthen its supra-national planning and executive institutions, on the path to a supra-national state. British politicians are alleging that domestic capital will play a glorious and dominant role in the Super-Market of the future, with Edward Heath fondly pointing out that the market available to eager entrepreneurs of the expanded community will be greater than the market of either the Soviet Union or the United States. Inaudible, amid these great dreams, was the production of any analysis of why the Common Market should want to admit Britain at all, eight years after Heath (as Macmillan's chief negotiator) was kicked bodily out of Brussels by De Gaulle.

The Common Market is prepared to accept Britain now because it is itself racked by recession, overproduction, industrial militancy and Europa-chauvinist paranoia about Japanese competition. Britain, with its problems only intensified, will be quite at home in this atmosphere. The British working class will be super-exploited in the Super-Market. And as for the British bourgeoisie, the crisis afflicting them will not be solved but merely deflected; their querulousness will not be extinguished but only stilled for a season.

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Sickle Cell Anemia: An "Interesting Pathology"

INVARIABLY THE PATIENT IS BLACK, invariably young, perhaps your own age, in fact, a thought which may disturb you when they bring her out on stage for you to see, for you to question. She (or he) has been wheeled from her hospital bed for your convenience, your medical education. It is a lecture in biochemistry, most likely, and you have been reading about blood and about hemoglobin, the molecule red blood cells contain; the protein with a backbone of iron, the carrier of whatever pure oxygen can be sucked from polluted air. By now you know hemoglobin well, you have memorized it: its four poly-peptide chains, two alpha, two beta (the "globin" part of the molecule); its four iron-containing "heme" groups; its fetal and adult forms; its electrophoretic patterns; its abnormal varieties: hemoglobin C and M and E and—this is the powerful one, the terrible one—hemoglobin S. One of its black victims is in front of you now, probably frightened, sitting before strange, mostly white, mostly male, faces. She is in a wheelchair, looking up for a moment, meeting your curious stares, then looking down at the floor.

"Tell these young doctors something about yourself, Miss Williams," the instructor says, smiling. "Tell them why you are in the hospital."

This is an exercise in "clinical correlation," an attempt on the part of the medical school to demonstrate that the "basic science" courses of your first year or two are not irrelevant or as sterile as they seem. This is what the catalogue calls "contact" with patients, "early exposure" to "clinical material." You have been looking forward to it, bored by years of organic chemistry and physics, lectures and diagrams. You are nervous, perhaps, like Miss Williams, but you are proud of your knowledge, and confident, like a doctor. You observe her closely: her arms and legs are long and skinny and gangling; her abdomen is short but full and protruding; her legs are heavily bandaged; her eyes are yellow; intravenous fluids run into her arm; she is dressed in a limp hospital nightgown; she is weak and difficult to hear.

"I have sickle cell disease," she says quietly. "Sickle cell anemia." Then she tells you her story, which typically goes something like this:

She is twenty-four years old and has been in the hospital eighteen times. She would get tired easily ever since she was a child; she did not develop as rapidly or as well as the other children; she would often get colds and more severe respiratory infections. At age seven her tonsils were removed. At age eight she was hospitalized for a month with severe joint pain, fever, and heart murmurs, diagnosed incorrectly as rheumatic fever. At twelve she developed ulcers on both ankles which would not heal, even now, twelve years later. She then began having periodic attacks of severe, incapacitating pain in her bones and joints, her back and her abdomen. These "crises" would last about a week, leaving her exhausted, weaker than ever, and sore all over.

When she was fourteen her appendix was removed. At sixteen her spleen was removed. In the last eight years she has had six more hospital admissions for the treatment of her recurrent leg ulcers which have eaten down to the layer of muscle and bone. Two admissions for pneumonia, two for long episodes of fever, chills, night-sweats and diarrhea. Now, she tells you, she is urinating blood, and her belly is swelling like a balloon and her heart, her doctors have told her, is too big and is getting tired. She can not sleep lying down, but only on three pillows, and she wakes up at night gasping for breath. Her eyes have been yellow for six years and her liver, she knows, is not working right. In her life she has received (if she remembers right) eighty-six transfusions of whole blood.

"Thank you, Miss Williams," the instructor says, and you awkwardly mumble thanks too, as she is wheeled back to the hospital.

In the brief discussion that follows, you learn that there is no cure for sickle cell anemia, nothing, in fact, that substantially helps a patient endure a crisis. You learn that very few patients with the disease—which strikes one Black in five hundred—manage to survive to the age of thirty. You guess, as you leave the lecture room with friends for lunch, that Miss Williams, with the soft voice and the memories of pain and the present of pain, will be dead before you practice medicine. But in fact, she is dead much sooner than that.

[II]

THESE DAYS SICKLE CELL ANEMIA has a certain *chic* in academic medical circles. The disease has always been considered "interesting pathology," but never, until very recently, has it been considered very *important*. The distinction is real and its consequences disturbing.

Sickle cell anemia is one of the very few fatal diseases which is known (that is, thought) to be caused by a demonstrable inherited abnormality—an identifiable, highly specific, biochemical aberration in the molecular structure of hemoglobin. As a consequence, it has for two decades

by Michael G. Michaelson