

# Portrait of a Marxist as a Young Nun



**Helena Sheehan**

---

Versions of this were published in the book *Marxism and Spirituality: An International Anthology* (Westport & London 1993) and in the journal *Socialism in the World* (Belgrade 1989). This text was originally written for a conference in Yugoslavia on *Socialism and the Spirit of the Age* in 1988. It was a first run at a work-in-progress called *Navigating the Zeitgeist*.

---

home page: <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehanh/sheehan.htm>

e-mail: [helena.sheehan@dcu.ie](mailto:helena.sheehan@dcu.ie)

doras index: <http://doras.dcu.ie/view/people/Sheehan, Helena.html>

---

Sometimes I feel as if I have lived through eons in a matter of decades. The waves of historical change such as swept over centuries in the past seem to have swept through my world several times over already. And who knows what I have yet to see? I am perhaps only halfway through the time I may expect my life to be.

---

In the beginning, there was little indication that it would be this way. It was such a stable world . Or so it seemed.

It seemed as if all historical change was in the past and that history had come to a kind of final resting point. All important issues were presented as basically settled. The answers only had to be looked up somewhere. Here we were. Dwight D Eisenhower was president of the greatest country in the world and Pius XII was pope of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, together personifying the stability and complacency of the world over which they jointly presided.



How little I knew, or could possibly have imagined, what was to come. There was little in the world of the 1950s to prepare us for the cataclysm of the 1960s.

Does cataclysm seem too strong a word? Perhaps. Certainly, some came through the decade with barely a scratch on the armour that protected their insensitivity and incomprehension. But for me, and not only for me, a whole world was swept under. Only gradually did a new one come into view. The shock of it, the acute sense of loss, the yawning abyss between what was lost and what was yet to be found, brought me to a crossroads and to the most severe test of my life.

What was lost? The whole world of my youth. It is true that it was a world I later came to regard as well lost. Nevertheless, no one will ever know how grievously I mourned its passing.

Its merits were not inconsiderable. There was a strength to it that made it seem invulnerable. There was a sweep to it that felt like totality. There was such solace within its overarching grandeur. It combined medieval synthesis and solemnity with modern science and technology. Monastic discipline and space age savoir faire mingled in an alliance that could not hold, but would nonetheless leave its mark.

It seemed to be the best of all possible worlds. Indeed, it seemed to be the only possible world.

---

More than anything else, my early life was dominated by the all-encompassing presence of the Roman Catholic Church. My family was catholic. My friends were catholic. My schools were catholic. My books were catholic. *Imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* were as natural and essential as title and author in opening pages of a book.

It was the rituals of the Catholic Church which above all else gave rhythm to the days and months and years of the first two decades of my life. Its rites of passage marked most decisively the stages through which I moved onward through my life world. . . . .

Each year revolved in the grooves of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, May procession, Pentecost.

Everything was codified with such precision: 10 commandments, 6 precepts of the church, 7 sacraments, 8 beatitudes, 7 capital sins, 12 apostles, 14 stations of the cross, 9 first Fridays, 40 hours devotion to the blessed sacrament, 5 joyful mysteries, 5 sorrowful mysteries, 5 glorious mysteries, 5 our fathers, 10 hail marys, 5 glory bes.

In time, I discerned different streams within this overall flow. Although a young female, I developed an increasing aversion to the traditions of female spirituality: rosaries, scapulars, apparitions, sugary sentimental prayers. In high school, I was taught by an order of nuns who seemed to believe the most central cause of the day was the beatification of their foundress. I felt my impatience with it all would reach breaking point at assemblies where girls would get up and declare: "I couldn't get my car started and then I prayed to Cornelia Connolly and then the car started."

Cornelia Connolly cured them of their colds, helped them find lost money (although this was supposed to be the job of St Anthony) and took care of mysterious 'special intentions'. The nuns prayed less to an adult Christ than to the holy child, which I thought was not only irrational but neurotic.

I read voluminously and soon felt that I had not only passed beyond my classmates but my teachers as well. My only close friend of my own age went to a different school and was male and black (setting off an interminable series of lectures from my mother about Martin Luther King and communist agitators), but mostly I sought out the company of older men, particularly Jesuits. I found it progressively difficult to have any respect for the female species in general and nuns in particular.

Yet I became a nun.

All my role models were men. I gravitated towards traditions of male spirituality, Jesuit traditions, which I found stronger, more rationalist, more activist. I prayed in the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola:

"Teach me to be generous, to give without counting the cost, to fight without heeding the wounds..."

I wanted to give myself without reserve. It was inevitable that I entered the convent, even though it meant enclosing myself within a world of women, leaving behind my notions of a career in politics, sublimating my sexuality, a vague and mysterious force to me, in ways I scarcely understood.

It was inevitable, because I was so oriented towards having a comprehensive world view and living in harmony with it. I thought that people around me were so busy going somewhere that they forgot to find out where they were going. This became axiomatic for me. It defined what I saw most people around me doing and what I was most resolved not to do. I was determined to see what I called 'the big picture' and to live in a way which kept it clearly in focus.

Catholicism addressed the big picture and demanded of its chosen the most complete commitment to contemplating it and communicating it. I did have my moments of doubt about its explanations, but I poured over apologetics textbooks and managed to convince myself that my doubts had been cogently answered. It did occur to me that I was only catholic because I was born into it and that others believed just as strongly in other religions, which I knew were out there, but I managed to channel my reading of books about other religions into an interpretation of them as pale approximations of the total truth that was catholicism and their adherents as half-hearted about religious practice, compared to catholics.

I felt 'called'. I believed that this thrust toward totality, which was so strong in me and made me so preoccupied with questions of origin and destiny, was God's way of pulling me toward the religious life. I was conditioned

to interpret it this way by the constant emphasis on 'vocation', which led me to believe that this restless searching was a sign of having been chosen to play a special role in understanding and teaching.

---

The day of my entrance to the convent was one of the most drastic rituals of closing one chapter of a life and beginning another that I have ever known. I closed the trunk full of the exact number of undershirts, black stockings, pencils, bars of soap, bottles of shampoo, etc. on the list, placed on the top an envelope with my 'dowry' I had worked all summer in a detective agency to earn. I donned the black serge dress of a postulant. I said goodbye to friends and neighbors and brothers and sisters and looked around the house for what I believed to be the last time and got into the car.

My parents and the nun who was my sponsor chattered away about what a beautiful autumn day it was, how it was better to be early than late, how long it would take to get to Chestnut Hill, how I would never have to worry about having a roof over my head (how wrong they were about that). I let it all pass over me, impressing on myself the enormity of what I was doing and anticipating the contemplative silence that was ahead. When we arrived, I was taken away, given my number in the order, shown to my cell in the dormitory and taken to a hall to say my goodbyes. When the decisive bell (the bell, we were told, was the voice of God) rang, we formed in rank in the order of our numbers and filed into chapel. One by one, we approached the altar and received the postulant's veil.

From that day on, it was the strictest regime: mass, meditation, meals, manual labour, spiritual reading. There were precise instructions down to the smallest detail: how to walk (noiselessly, eyes down, hands inside sleeves, close to the wall, measured steps), how often to wash our hair (once a week), how often to change our underwear (every 3 days), how to undress without looking at our bodies (slip the nightdress over the head before taking underwear off), how to make our beds (square corners), how to eat a banana (with a fork).

We were assigned to fixed places in refectory, in chapel, at recreation. Recreation was the one hour a day when we were allowed to speak. There were rigid guidelines about topics which could and could not be discussed. We were not to speak of our past life, we were not to criticise our present life (this meant not only not criticising our superiors but even not commenting on the food). We were not to use the adjective 'my'. It was our book, our veil, our slip, etc. If we were told to put our name in something, it was written 'For the use of Sister ...' There were no newspapers. There were no letters except to and from our parents (but not during lent or retreat) and these were censored.

During these months we received instruction in the holy rule and in the 3 vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The chapter of the holy rule on chastity was remarkable in that it dealt with virtually everything except sex. It began:

"The sisters shall live in the congregation as the angels live in heaven, that is, their life is to be altogether interior and spiritual and detached from everything sensual."

It went on. We were never to look at another person in the eyes. We were never to touch another person. We were never to converse with one person alone, ie, we were to be in company of three or more. We were to have no 'particular friendships'. We were to have no unnecessary conversations with males 'whether lay or ecclesiastical'. For necessary conversations another sister was to be present and report to the superior.

There was something in me rebelling all the time against this monastic ethos, against the whole negative vocabulary of death and renunciation. We were to be 'dead to the self', 'dead to the flesh', 'dead to the world'.

The habit we were sewing and would soon be wearing for the rest of our lives was to be our shroud. Yet, I asked myself, wasn't it God who created the world, the flesh, ourselves, our feelings for others? But according to Thomas a Kempis:

"I go into the world of men and I return less a man."

I couldn't accept it. The attitude of blind unquestioning obedience was alien to me. I often thought of the line from the film *The Nun's Story*, spoken to Gabrielle by her father on the day of her entrance:

"I can see you poor, I can see you chaste, but obedient - never."

I believed in discipline. I wanted to purge myself of self-indulgence and to give myself to something larger than myself. But I could not renounce my standards of intellectual and emotional integrity, which, however immature, were nevertheless very strong in me.

This, of course, was intellectual pride. I was constantly reprimanded for this, even when I said nothing. They knew the signs. They could read it on my face, which had not yet gone dead in the way it was supposed to do. We were supposed to do our best in the tasks we were given to do and yet we were caught in a trap when we did them well and were accused and accused ourselves of pride. When others came to me for help with their studies or with their sewing, at both of which I excelled, I was caught in a contradiction: I was confident in my abilities and wished to be gracious and generous toward others who were not so confident or able, but to help them was to be proud and arrogant.

I was told I had to conquer my pride and I tried to be humble, but no sooner did I make some advance than I took pride in my humility. This spirituality built around constant self-scrutiny and striving for perfection was torment to me, as it took my already extreme self-scrutinising and perfectionist tendencies and turned them from constructive to destructive forces. I wasn't so much the self-scrutinising and perfectionism that constituted the problem, as much as the fact that it was based on a dualism of body and spirit, of reason and faith, which went against the grain of my quest for wholeness. The anti-physicalism, and even more the anti-intellectualism, came as a constant assault on my character. Others simply let it roll off their backs without torturing themselves in the negative energy and the impossible contradictions that it engendered.

We were gradually introduced to a whole series of secret practices: things which were never to be discussed outside the order, in fact, things which were not to be discussed inside the order, except to our superiors: examen, penances, acts of humility, chapter of faults and what was called 'the discipline'.

We knew nothing of 'the discipline' until holy week. We were in retreat in preparation for the ceremony of being formally received into the order on Easter Monday. We had been immersed in the Good Friday liturgy, full of the vivid imagery of scourging at the pillar, bleeding from the wounds, carrying the cross, crucifixion, death for our sins. We then had a conference with the mistress of novices. She produced an instrument, a chain which branched out into a number of sub-chains, each with a hook at the end, and instructed us in the precise techniques of self-flagellation. Every Saturday night from henceforth we were to go to the dormitory after night prayers and before recreation and remove our corsets (the stiff old-fashioned kind with stays and laces) and underpants and tie our stockings below our knees. No one who has never experienced it can know the sheer oddity of wearing layers upon layers of white linen and black serge and a long flowing veil and a stiff guimpe with no underpants making edifying conversation in the common room. At the end of recreation, the bell would ring, the lights would go out and the shades would go down. We pulled our veils down over our faces, our sleeves down over our hands, our skirts up over our backs. We would then take out our instrument and inflict it upon ourselves as hard as was possible without drawing blood, while reciting prayers in unison.

We were somewhat shocked by this, but we had come this far and accepted so many things leading up to it, that we accepted it and moved on to the excitement of Easter and Easter Monday. In contrast, there was the most absurd fussing over our physical appearance as we set our hair, practiced walking in white high heeled shoes and saw the solemnity and self-abnegation of the novitiate broken by girlish giggles and the silliest of wedding day preparations. There were 79 of us (out of 90 who had entered on the same day) all to be brides the next day.

On Easter Monday, we dressed in long white dresses and wedding veils and new hairdos and solemnly filed into the enormous chapel of the mother house to the strains of the novitiate choir singing *Veni Sponsa Christi*:

“Come, bride of Christ, receive the crown that has been prepared for you.”

At the appointed time, we prostrated ourselves in the aisles and gave the prescribed answers to the prescribed questions asked by the bishop:

"What do you ask, my children?"

"I ask for the grace of God and to be admitted into this congregation..."

It went on in this vein. We promised to live by the rules of the congregation. We declared ourselves dead to the world, dead to the flesh, dead to our old selves. One by one, we then approached the bishop who put into our hands the habit of the order. Out we processed in white carrying the black habits solemnly in our hands. Outside in a room set aside, we were undressed down to our slippers by older nuns. Then our hair was severely cut (the next day our heads were shaved). We were then clothed in the habit: the long black serge dress, the cincture around the waist with heavy rosary attached, the white linen framing the face, the stiff white guimpe covering the chest and then crowning it all, the flowing black veil. We then processed back into the chapel dressed in the habit. The bishop then read out our names:

Joanne Mac Donald will be known as Sister Matthew Anita . . .

Elizabeth Hewitt will be known as Sister Catherine Robert . . .

Helena Sheehan will be known as Sister Helen Eugenie . . .

Mary Donnelly will be known as Sister Terence Edward . . .

Patricia Ruth will be known as Sister Michael Louise . . .

Dorothy Krause will be known as Sister James Dorothy . . .

These, we were told, were the names by which we would be known in heaven. We had been asked to submit three names in order of preference, but the name given might not be any of these. In my case, it was none of these.

---

Life in the novitiate, especially during what was called the canonical year, was even stricter than life in the postulate. We went into deep cloister. There was even less contact with the outside world. There were no more university studies other than theology. There was more meditation, more penance, more severe scrutiny, more merciless admonition. The occasional letters which we were forced to write home were bland beyond belief. Anything about what went on behind our cloistered walls was out, as was any reference to our personal feelings. Most letters were lyrical descriptions of nature and the change of seasons on the grounds of the mother house with dutiful and cliched praise of the glory of God revealed in His creation. Any real literary flare, even in doing this, would result in the letter being handed back for rewriting with a strong rebuke for vanity and another exhortation to empty the self.

Meals were full of tension. Except on Sundays and first class feasts, they were taken in silence while an assigned sister read an assigned book of spiritual reading. One such book expounded the exceedingly saccharine spirituality of Teresita Quevedo, a Spanish nun. It was very popular with the other sisters, but generated such antipathy in me that the effect on my digestion was the least of my troubles. The tension in the refectory was heightened by all sorts of other factors: the difficulty of keeping custody of the eyes when a senile older sister started acting up, the difficulty of not laughing when something stuck us funny. Every morning the lives of the saints according to their feast days were read at breakfast. One day it was the story of a saint who was so chaste even from infancy that he refused his mother's breast. It set off a giddiness in me that I could not repress, no matter how hard I tried. In fact, in circumstances of such solemnity and such tension, the harder one tries not to laugh the more difficult it become to stop. Needless to say, penance had to be done. Even for lesser offenses, such as allowing a knife to fall off a plate, it was necessary to get up from the table, pull the sleeves down over the hands and the veil down over the face, walk to the top of the huge refectory, kneel before the superior, kiss the floor and say:

"Please, Reverend Mother, may I have a penance for making an unnecessary noise?"

"Say three hail marys, Sister."

"Thank you, Reverend Mother."

We would the kiss the floor again, rise, go to our place, kneel down, kiss the floor, say the prayers, kiss the floor again, rise, pin up sleeves and veil, sit down and finish eating at the same time as everyone else. Trying to do so often generated such nervousness as to make it almost certain to drop a fork or make some other unnecessary noise and start the whole cycle all over again. The refectory was also the scene for acts of humility assigned by the superior. A sister would have to rise, pull down sleeves and veil, kneel, kiss the floor, stretch out her arms and say:

"Please, Sisters, pray for me."

"Yes, Sister." (in unison).

"Thank you, Sisters."

She would then kiss the floor, pin up sleeves and veil and go to her place.

Another regular ritual was chapter of faults. Every Friday night after recreation, the lights would go out, the shades down, the veils down over the face, the sleeves down over the hands, and, one by one, we would approach the superior, kiss the floor, prostrate ourselves and confess our infractions of the holy rule. If any sister knew of an infraction a sister had committed that she had not declared, she was obliged, in charity, to accuse her. The superior would then admonish her and give her a penance to do.

I persevered through the novitiate, although it was a severe struggle. I was totally alone in my struggle with its contradictions and with my irrepressible rebelliousness. I couldn't control the rebellion, neither of my mind nor of my body. The questions wouldn't go away, nor would the floods of tears at night or the crippling abdominal pains in the morning. I could not reconcile myself to the constant negation of what I felt in the depths of myself should be affirmed. I could not acquiesce to the persistent pressure to divide what I felt should be united and what could not in any case be divided, despite all the prescriptions and pretensions. I could not separate my soul either from my mind or from my body. No matter how hard I tried, I could not convince myself that it could or should be done.

On the other side of it, however, there were moments of such exhilaration. I remember times singing the requiem mass in the novitiate choir when a nun in the order died and was brought to the mother house to be buried. It seemed as if the world came together and everything was in its place.

---

During my third year, I was a full time teacher in a parochial school in North Philadelphia. Although it was a relief to be away from the cloister of the mother house and mixing with people in the outside world again, it actually accentuated the contradictions. I was given a series of tests, which were not quite as drastic as the instruction given to Sister Luke in *The Nun's Story* to fail her examinations because another nun felt humiliated by her academic excellence, but they were along the same lines. Because I was an enthusiastic and creative teacher, I brought down upon myself bitter (and exceedingly bitchy) resentment within the convent.

Another problem arose from the fact that the parish was wracked with racial tension. It was not just that I opposed the racism of the white working class parishioners and the pastor and principal (who was also my religious superior), who wanted to bring in a legitimacy rule to keep black kids out of the school. It was that I had very strong feelings towards these black kids that were not reducible to my anti-racism and that was against all the rules. Sometimes they would come crying to me and everything in me wanted to pull their faces into my skirts and run my fingers through their bristly hair.

Eventually, I came to the conclusion that virtually everything that was natural and human and healthy about me was against some rule and I came to a point of crisis in relation to the whole monastic ethos. One night I stayed up all night crying, praying, pushing myself to the point of decision. By dawn, I had achieved some sort of clarity and I decided to leave. The next day was one of the most difficult days of my life. I had a day's work to do as a teacher, but everything was different. I was still wearing a nun's habit and still being addressed as Sister Helen Eugenie SSJ, only I didn't really feel it was me any more. I still had things to do to arrange my departure and to finish the school year, but I no longer abided so strictly by the rules. I made phone calls without permission. I posted letters without giving them to my superior to read first. I couldn't live this way for long. I couldn't bear the feeling of not being at one with myself.

My superior, who had given me permission to acquire and read Kung, Suenens and Teilhard de Chardin (because she was too dim to know what she was doing), was bewildered by my reasons. I was her first point of contact with the ferment that was about to sweep through the church like a tidal wave. She told me not to mention it to any of the other sisters or parishioners and sent me up to the mother house to explain myself.

It was highly unlikely that I would even have known that these authors existed. Although I was in the convent during Vatican II, we were remarkably untouched by it. However, I was exceedingly (my mistress of novices would have said excessively) curious about it and I managed to find out something of what was being discussed among contemporary theologians from Jesuits, who came to see me. I found in the new thinking emerging in the church at that time an affirmation of my most lonely thoughts, which contributed to a growing confidence that I was not wrong and I was not alone. It was a more healthy, more positive attitude, not so preoccupied with crippling negation. It affirmed the questioning mind and responsible commitment over unquestioning faith and blind obedience.

I felt that I was leaving for all the same reasons as I entered. I still felt called. I even considered joining another order more in tune with the whole spirit of *aggiornamento*. I did not anticipate that the questioning, which had brought me this far, would take me so far that I would not only no longer belong in the convent but that I would no longer believe in the church.

It was arranged for me to leave on the last day of the school year. The other sisters were to leave for school as usual without noticing that I wasn't coming. Then my mother was to arrive with clothes. When she arrived, the superior brought me these clothes and sent me into the nearest lavatory. To be asked to take off this habit, which had been given to me in such splendour, in such a desultory fashion got to me. I took it off, remembering what each part of it symbolised and how carefully I had always handled it, and left it in a heap on the floor.

---

I felt such a misfit in the world to which I returned. It was not just the Rip van Winkle effect of discovering how things had moved on in the time I was gone. It was a feeling of being neither here nor there, of being thoroughly out of joint with the world around me, of there being no place for me in the world.

Even on the most superficial level, it was hard to get used to wearing ordinary clothes. I kept feeling the lack of the long flowing veil and the swish of the long heavy skirts. I was a frightful sight. On a school outing before I left, I had got sunburned, so there was a red triangle cutting up my face in the most unnatural manner, which was accentuated by an indentation left by the habit across my forehead. I only had about half an inch of hair on my head from having my head shaved so recently.

On a deeper level, I plunged into a dark night of the soul. The questioning process which had undermined the foundations of convent life for me was now unleashed in full force and went tearing into the very foundations of the whole catholic world view with relentless rigour. I became obsessed with the question of the existence of God. I went over and over all the answers in the apologetics textbooks. I struggled with logic. I prayed for faith.

I managed to continue to believe, but only through the new theology. I responded most fully to the work of Teilhard de Chardin. I loved his passionate affirmation of matter, of the earth. I loved his respect for science, for reason. I loved his world-historical, teleological grandeur.

On the practical side, I had to earn a living and to continue my education. I got my university degree at night while doing a succession of 9 to 5 jobs during the day. The first job after I left was in a direct line with what I had left behind. At that time, it was unheard of for an ex-nun to continue to teach in the same school system. I won that battle against the wishes of the order I had left and got a job teaching in a different school staffed by a different order. Also, at that time, lay teachers were not allowed to teach religion. I fought that and won as well, arguing that, if I had been qualified to teach it the year before, I was still qualified the year after.

I threw myself into my teaching with little awareness of the controversy being stirred up by it and of the forces moving against me. I was only a mild liberal (especially compared to what I was later to become). I taught religion in the spirit of Vatican II theology. I taught the kids to sing *We Shall Overcome* and talked about the civil rights movement down south. That was all, but in 1965 it was considered too much. I became an early casualty in the post-Vatican II struggle between the agents of *aggiornamento* and defenders of orthodoxy.

One day I was called out of my classroom and told by the principal-superior that I was to go immediately downtown to the office of the superintendent of education. When I arrived, I was told that I was an excellent teacher and fired in the same breath. I was right, he said, but I was too controversial. Parents, priests and fellow teachers were complaining (to everyone except to me). I had to go. I was shocked. I tried to pray. I couldn't. For the first time in my life, I felt that there was no one there to hear. By the time I left his office, it was already dark. It was late November. It was thunder and lightning and pouring rain. I felt as if the ground had come from under my feet.

In one day, all the questions of centuries came to a crescendo in my brain and I could no longer hold on to the beliefs which had sustained me in my life so far. I felt the full force of all my accumulating doubts. I turned a corner, in which I could no longer hold on to belief, sending me into free fall through a void, bereft of all my bearings, deprived of all my traditions.

I lost my faith, my job, my home, I lost the very meaning of my life, all within 24 hours, on a day that began in a most deceptive resemblance of normality. I proclaimed the gospel that morning, albeit with the teilhardian gloss that was enabling me to hold onto it, teaching others what, by nightfall, I would no longer believe myself. The shock jolted me into a break that was already inevitable.

When I arrived home, I was told that I had rocked the boat once too often and I stormed out in anger. I walked the streets and lived out of bus terminals and railway stations. I was as alone and as desperate as it was possible to be.

---

My whole world was in ruins. In time, I would build anew, from new foundations upward. But, in between the collapse of one world view and the reconstruction of another from the ruins, there was only the abyss.

I often wonder where I found the strength to cross the bridge from that emptiness to the first stirrings of hope in the possibility of a new fullness. Perhaps it was sheer curiosity, a need to know: if the world was not as I had thought it was, what way was it anyway? Or perhaps it was pure animal survival, the sort of natural evolutionary striving that brought our species up from the primal mud and the dark.

Whatever it was that got me to the turning point, past the make or break, the crucible, the boundary situation, I did begin to find my way through a long dark tunnel into a most intricate labyrinth. Eventually, I discerned a shaft of light, which I followed to the point where I could stop stumbling in the darkness and see more and more of some kind of a road ahead of me.

People later told me that I had been ahead of my time, that I had come too soon, that if I had waited, everything would have been all right. But, by then, I too had moved on. I may have been moved by history, but I was tossed and torn at the crest of each wave and not dragged onward at the tail end of each unavoidable advance.

---

Philosophy, purged of theology, became the driving force of my life.

I was in many ways only emerging from the middle ages into the modern era, as I experienced within myself the breakdown of the medieval synthesis and lived through the history of modern philosophy in my own mind, coming in a rush to the conflicting voices of my own time. Co-incident with my personal crisis of faith were the complex consequences of the relativisation effect of Vatican II upon the whole milieu in which I found myself. In the Jesuit university, in which I was studying, the hegemony of scholastic philosophy was cracking.

As with many another ex-thomist, existentialist voices at first spoke most directly to my condition. I studied philosophy with extraordinary intensity, which was a source of affectionate amusement to my teachers. When one heard I was headed for the beach for the weekend, he speculated that my beach towel had on it:

THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING (Socrates).

I laughed at such moments of light relief from the fierce existential angst, which nevertheless continued to weigh heavily upon me in those days.

Another lecturer at the time predicted a prolonged virginity for me, because:

"After all, who wants to talk about Hegel at the breakfast table?"

He felt it was a safe bet to assume that nobody had yet been subjected to such a stark discomfort, given the fact that I had only recently left the convent and had only got as far as turning into a secular equivalent, a heideggerian variant of being-towards-death after taking off the veil. I absolutely reeked of *sturm und drang*. I brooded with neantisation. I ached for authenticity. Not exactly a barrel of laughs. Not the way to unwind after a hard day's work.

This too would pass, but it had to run its course. There were no short cuts between the dissolution of a complete world view and the emergence of a well-grounded alternative. A long and winding road stretched between what was lost and what was yet to be found.

Prometheus defying the gods and seizing fire, Sisyphus negating the gods and raising rocks, Zarathustra proclaiming the death of God and the transcendence of man, Atlas, proud and unyielding, sustaining alone the world he had fashioned: these were the most powerful images illuminating the darkness and pointing beyond it. The rebellion, the higher fidelity, the transvaluation of values, the free man's worship: these were some of the crucial concepts in adjusting to a universe henceforth without a master and affirming it as neither sterile nor futile and finding the strength to live and love and create in it.

But learning to say yes to life, looking for the meaning of life in life itself, finding the joy of the struggle in the struggle itself: this was only a beginning, an orientation. It was not enough.

Existentialism took me through the transition to the point of taking up the materials of my own times once again, this time more rooted in concrete experience and aware of the open-ended and precarious character of human existence, but it had too many lacunae for me to build anything more solid on it. Its emphasis on the isolated individual alone with his fate addressed my own isolation and alienation, but it did not do justice to the socio-historical context of human existence (even of the experience of isolation and alienation). Its tendency to undervalue the rational and to reject systematising thought was a necessary counterbalance to past systems, but it could not form the basis of a new synthesis.

There were (and still are) many pressures against the very idea of a new synthesis. The sheer complexity of contemporary experience has produced a plethora of philosophical movements eschewing in no uncertain terms the very idea of such a synthesis. I have read and considered all such arguments and argued vigorously against their exponents, but not without assimilating whatever I believed to be of value in logical positivism, linguistic analysis, pragmatism, phenomenology, structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and all the variants thereof and not without refining my own concepts in the process.

I could not live my life, however, without a picture of the world in which I was living it, without being able to see my story within a larger story. Any philosophy lacking the thrust toward totality ultimately became part of the problem rather than its solution. Up to a point, such philosophies highlight the complexities and difficulties in coming to terms with the intricacies of contemporary experience, but beyond a certain point, they obstruct a deeper coming to terms and inhibit a more daring grasp of its meaning. They do not illuminate experience, but add to the darkness. They do not organise experience, but add to the clutter.

I always struggled to see things whole. I always sought to grasp the totality. I could ultimately never settle for anything less.

Of course, I was born into a ready-made totality. I was nurtured by the intellectual comprehensiveness and ritual grandeur of pre-Vatican II catholicism and, even when the bottom fell out of it and I could no longer

believe in it, leaving me raw and rootless and roaming a world which felt like a wasteland, it nevertheless left a taste for totality, which I could not shake off, no matter how well I subsequently learned to live without God and mass and heaven and christmas.

Indeed, I came to believe that I should not shake it off. It was something too basic to depend on the validity of one particular way of seeing the totality. A few years later, when I had resurfaced in full flight expounding on the need to have a revolutionary vision as well as a revolutionary movement, Tom Hayden once remarked that I had a very catholic sort of mind. I asked what he meant and he replied: "Very synthetic, very passionate."

I have always acknowledged this debt to catholicism, however radical my rejection of nearly everything else about it. It inculcated a belief in having a comprehensive world view and a demand for total commitment to the values flowing from it, which has stood me in good stead, even if it has been turned to purposes the church never intended for it.

This is a far deeper and much different thing from the glib interpretation often put on a transformation such as mine, which is superficially seen as simply substituting one religion for another. When I later told a protestant professor of mine that I had become a communist, he wrote back to me:

"I don't understand how you could have become a communist, but then again, I've never been a catholic either."

It was true, but there was much more to be said. I did not go directly from being a catholic to being a communist. There were many ports and many storms between the one and the other. There were many vantage points, from which to see the world, explored between these two places.

The contrasts were as striking as the continuities. Learning to explain the natural world without recourse to supernatural forces, learning to live without God, learning to live without the church: these marked a sharp break not to be taken lightly, especially by those who have never been able to find it in themselves to make it.

The many continuities, the taste for totality, both in terms of philosophical vision and moral commitment, the need to ritualise that vision and that commitment, the emphasis on a strong inner life as a foundation for our outer relationships: these are fundamental human strivings. They have expressed themselves through the world's religions in the course of our evolutionary development so far, but they are not reducible to religion. They can not only survive religious belief, but they can evolve into higher forms.

I have not been in the habit in recent years of using the term 'spirituality'. However, when asked to address it, I note that I do not believe that spirituality is dependent upon religion, however much it has been nurtured and developed by it, but it is dependent on world view. By spirituality I mean that deepest core of a person where we sort ourselves out in relation to our most fundamental assumptions, our deepest values. This active sorting out involves a constant synthesising of experience, not only our own immediate personal experience, but the collective experience of our world.

Even though I have now lived more of my life as an atheist than I did as a theist, I feel as great a need for contemplation as ever I did. No matter how much the activist, I need a considerable amount of time alone to contemplate. No matter how talkative I can be, I require an extraordinary amount of silence. In fact the activism feeds upon the contemplation and the talk feeds upon the silence and vice versa.

The great interest in spirituality today indicates a great hunger for something that has been lost, but the flurry of new fads on the one hand and the revival of religion on the other reflect a desire for a quick fix, a short cut, a

second-hand spirituality. But the old forms cannot meet the needs of a new age and the new fads will only reinforce the worst evasions of the new age. The quick fix will leave the vessel even more empty. There are no short cuts, no esoteric techniques, no magic mantras, to fill that need to be one with oneself and at one with what is worth affirming in the wider world. There is no second hand fulfillment of this need.

Even if we locate ourselves within an existing tradition, we need to work through it in our own time and in our own way in order to make it fully our own. It must be our own thinking, our own synthesising of experience, to produce our own world view, which can be the only grounding for a sound spirituality. Very few people are willing to do this, but those are the only people who are truly centred, the only people who are really 'together'.

Although I eventually found in marxism a far firmer grounding for my spirituality, I still find more in common with religious believers who have really sorted it all out for themselves than with other marxists who haven't. Although I have found within marxism the ultimate resources I have needed to sort it all out, I cannot say that I have met too many marxists who are as 'soulful', as deep, as warm, as generous as christians. It needn't be so.

I find everything positive that I have taken from my christian past entirely compatible with marxism, even including what has been called mystical experience. Both before and after believing in God, I have had moments of heightened awareness and emotional exhilaration, a powerful feeling for the fullness of things, a merging with the totality. Openness to the far reaches of human experience, both the heights and the depths, needs no God to underwrite it.

In my striving for synthesis, marxism did not at first present itself as a fully-fledged option, although I drew on Marx along with Feuerbach, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, James, Dewey, Whitehead and put together the elements of a world view that was processive, relational, contextual, holistic, naturalist, historicist.

---

I was evolving politically as well as philosophically and struggling for an analysis of the social order as well as the cosmic context. It was not only that I could no longer sing *Faith of Our Fathers*, but before long *The Star-Spangled Banner* had to go as well. The stable world of my youth, in which a good catholic was a good American, was well and truly shattered. Once the seamless web had come untangled, every thread had to be taken up again. The whole of the civil society I had taken for granted had to be called into question and sorted out all over again.

Not that everyone who lived through the same years felt the vibrations of these tempestuous tides in the same way. Indeed, many of my contemporaries pursued their daily rounds and private pleasures, living lives remarkably similar to those of their parents, selling insurance, pushing prams, buying wallpaper, eating pizza, mowing lawns, watching soap operas and securing pensions, untroubled by apocalyptic interrogation, untouched by epochal engagement. They felt no need to hurl themselves at history in the making, no compulsion to feel the pulse of the times, no obsession with being at the cutting edge of the era.

Others of my contemporaries, however, were made of different stuff and had other priorities. With them, I felt the pulsations of powerful forces converging within me and radiating out again.

"Here you are," said Tom Hayden, handing me a cup of coffee on the day after we first met, "this will help carry you forward to the next era of history." He had a way of seeing and saying things like that, things that not only penetrated personality, but gathered up the collective experience of a generation and coaxed it another step. It was a time for saying things like that.

It was a time of transformation, breathing the air of which made many people more world-historical than at any time I remember before or since. We all struggled in those days to name the zeitgeist and to name ourselves in relation to it. I burned with it, so much so that I was teasingly called "World-historical Helena", even among others who burned with it.

In the *Port Huron Statement*, I found an analysis of American society and a sense of direction toward an alternative that spoke powerfully both to my estrangement and to my longing. As a new left activist, I attended and then organised anti-war marches, draft and tax resistance, women's liberation meetings and talked long into the night about everything from food prices to free love, in an atmosphere in which everything seemed to be up for grabs, all philosophical assumptions had to be re-thought and all social arrangements had to be re-negotiated.

A momentum had been building and gathering mass and velocity. Questioning that began in response to particular injustices swelled into a critique of capitalism, which saw racism, sexism, poverty and war, no longer as isolated phenomena that occurred in spite of the system, but as interconnected manifestations that emerged because of it. Movements mobilised for specific reforms converged and adopted the rhetoric of revolution. Peaceful protests erupted into increasingly bitter and violent confrontations.

Civil society was torn asunder. Families were split down the middle. At times we even shocked ourselves by how far we had come and how quickly. One of the slogans of the day was:

"We are the people our parents warned us against."

We could no longer sit down cozily to thanksgiving dinners together. I certainly couldn't sit down with my brother in the army who was transporting nerve gas to Thailand. Gone were the days of watching Hopalong Cassidy and Gene Autry and playing cowboys and indians together. I had faced a flank of soldiers with gas masks on and bayonets fixed at Fort Dix and wondered if any of them was my brother before being tear gassed. The interface between us and them was more and more marked by marches, occupations, arrests, trials and prisons.



The whole texture of our everyday lives was transformed in a fantastic flourishing of new forms: a vibrant counter-culture of communes, co-ops, collectives, sit-ins, teach-ins, be-ins, liberated zones, consciousness raising, street theatre, underground press and independent cinema. It was a whole vast network of alternative institutions, which we prematurely saw as the embryo of a new society germinating within the shell of the old.

It was an atmosphere which brought spirituality into politics, in a way that was different from anything we had previously known or even imagined. Much of it was in the mode of a quick fix, latching on to eastern religions as a panacea for everything that was wrong with the western world. For myself, however, it was the discovery that politics was about everything, about consciousness, about the texture of everyday life, and not just about

governmental institutions. It posed problems requiring original solutions, for which there were no gurus and no panaceas to bridge the gap between what we wanted to destroy and what we wanted to create.

---

There is still much to be said in settling accounts with the 1960s and the great tide of social unrest that shook much of the western world to its very foundations, despite the recent flurry of superficial and spurious assessments of it, as the mass media noted in 1988 that it had been twenty years since the watershed year 1968. Jerry Rubin's egoistic and exhibitionist trip from yippie to yuppie has received more media attention than all the serious work of all of the rest of us in all the years since, in our long march through all the institutions of society. The lingering impression left by it all is of spoiled kids running on a rampage and getting high on the action, who have now either grown up to become prospering entrepreneurs and respectable matrons or have not grown up and bask in anachronistic sixties nostalgia irrelevant to the 80s.

Despite desertion by the opportunist, the cowardly, the faint-hearted, the flotsam that flow with every tide and despite genuine casualties, those really committed then are still committed now, sadder but wiser, older, quieter, less certain of the future, but far from finished.

What did we accomplish? In the 1960s, we seized the intellectual and moral initiative. We shook up a very smug and stable social order, which would never be the same again. We challenged the hegemony of the dominant ideology and shattered forever the consensus of the 1950s.

It is true that we have since lost that initiative and witnessed the aggressive re-assertion of all that we sought to undermine: the primacy of the free market, imperialist patriotism, traditionalist definitions of male and female roles, fundamentalist religion. However, the pendulum has not swung back to where it was and these areas remain disputed territory.

It is true that no government fell, but it is also true that no government has ever ruled in such an uncontested way as before. It is true that capitalism has prevailed and indeed has shown itself to be a far more resilient system than we ever imagined, capable of restructuring itself and regaining lost ground on a scale we never could have anticipated. However, our critique of capitalism has not been refuted and massive (if not so noisy) disaffection remains and may yet rise up again.

The legacy of the 1960s is contested and complex. It is a story of both victory and defeat. Our defeats were due, not only to the resilience of the capitalist system, but also to our own limitations and blindspots. Our movement splintered into bitter and opposing factions, each with its own set of particular limitations and blindspots.

As for myself, I took issue with the strain of anti-intellectualism, the cult of violence, the tyranny of structurelessness, the romanticisation of the third world, the indulgence of drug culture, the ethos of consumption versus production. I did, however, share the general new left rejection of the old left, naivete about power politics, ignorance of economics, suspicion of science and technology.

---

In the 1970s, I set out to re-assess my new left attitude to the old left and to fill in the gaps left open in my world view in the 60s. This was greatly facilitated by the fact that I left America in the early 1970s and I have lived in Europe ever since.

In America, I grew up in the shadow of cold war anti-communism and it was at first difficult enough to move to the left and to soften into a kind of anti-anti-communism, without immediately embracing communism. After growing up on the Army-Mc Carthy hearings and *I Led Three Lives*, it was a mind-blowing experience even to find myself in the same room as communists in anti-war coalitions. As other new left activists, I was constantly clashing with old left activists, stalinists and trotskyists alike, whom we saw as stodgy, manipulative, unimaginative, overcautious and reductionist. For their part, they were forever counterposing what they called bread and butter issues to the worst excesses of drug culture, flower power and free love.

---

In Europe, the distance between old and new left narrowed considerably. This was both because of my own more serious study of marxism and a political atmosphere more conducive to it. After several years in Sinn Fein (later called the Workers Party), in which I became a marxist and organised educational courses in marxism, I also re-assessed my attitude to the world communist movement and to Eastern European socialism.

I had evolved a world view, which I described as processive, contextualist and naturalist, before I came to a serious study of marxism. The driving force of my philosophical quest was to transcend dichotomies of fact and value, reason and emotion, nature and history, theory and experience, etc. and to do so in a way which was firmly grounded in the empirical world. I also had a burning commitment to transform the social order in a way which would overcome oppression based on class, race and gender.

It was natural that I should gravitate towards marxism. The surprising thing was that I developed so far in the direction of marxism without conscious or direct influence from it. When I did finally come to it, the effect was electric. It was the sort of intergration I had been seeking, more deeply rooted than anything I had yet come across or been able to achieve. It was only then that I fully grasped the grounding of the spiritual in the material, the crucial connection between the psychological / philosophical / cultural dimensions of human existence and the economic foundations. I came to see how far reaching were the consequences of the dominant mode of production of any given period.

Interestingly, of the authors who influenced me most - Engels (more than Marx himself), Gramsci and Caudwell - two of the three were from a catholic background. But what a long way I, as they, had come from it. As did they, I became a communist.

More and more of what I read emanated from Eastern Europe and from communist sources in Western Europe. How different was the picture of existing socialism from the cold war picture I retained even through the sixties. This grew in me until I felt that I had actually changed sides. One day I got up and went into New Books in Dublin and asked for a form to apply to join the Communist Party of Ireland. I didn't really know party member, but it simply felt right and I did it.

I was also working on my PhD in philosophy at Trinity College Dublin. I was fully aware that the one cancelled out the other, so far as career prospects were concerned. My commitment to the fusion of the philosophical and political dimensions on every other level was so strong, however, that I could say so be it, though not without a certain measure of bitterness and anger, as I saw the safer people getting on in the world in a way that I couldn't.

---

The experience of becoming a marxist, however, was its own reward. All that had been struggling toward synthesis suddenly clicked into place. It was like putting a puzzle together, having put a fair few pieces in place

and then suddenly getting the gist of it and seeing the shape of the whole. It was not having the puzzle all finished and put together with every single piece in place, but it was turning the corner and seeing where it was leading. It was the difference between seeing all the items in a pattern and seeing the pattern.

It sent me rushing down the corridors of knowledge, with a new key for opening every door, discovering again everything I already knew, seeing it all again with a kind of second sight, making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. It spurred me on both to assimilate new fields of knowledge and to re-assimilate old fields of knowledge. I began to get a grip on the broad outlines of economics, science and technology and, as a result, I began to comprehend philosophy, politics, sociology, history and literature more clearly for finally seeing them in the fullness of their interconnections. My mind was soaring wildly and yet it had never been so securely anchored.

What set marxism apart from all other modes of thought was that it is a comprehensive world view that is firmly grounded in empirical knowledge and socio-historical process. It is a way of seeing things whole, explaining the natural world without resort to supernatural forces and giving scope to the fullness of human creativity without detaching it from its historicity.

Such is the fragmentary character of contemporary life that few can see history as anything other than a fortuitous succession of events, with no real rhyme or reason, as only the play of the contingent and the unforeseen, as only one emergency following upon another, as only the arbitrary desires and decisions of great men, in respect of which there can be no generalisations.

For a marxist, history has a coherent storyline, a plot, a rhythm, a pattern, in which seemingly disconnected, haphazard and independent events are interconnected and rooted in a larger process. For a marxist, all economic policies, political institutions, legal codes, moral norms, sexual roles, aesthetic tastes, thought patterns and even what passes as common sense, are products of a particular pattern of socio-historical development rooted in the transformation of the mode of production.

It is not a pre-determined pattern or a closed process, in which the ultimate victory of socialism is inevitable. Although there is a determinate pattern of interconnections, the precise shape of socio-historical development is only discernable post factum, for history is an open process, in which there is real adventure, real risk and real surprise, a process in which there are no inevitable victories. Indeed, with the staggering resources poured into creating the means of annihilating our own species several times over, it is difficult to deny that the human project itself could fail, never mind its evolution into higher forms of social organisation.

Not that all who have called themselves marxists would accept this conception of it, even in the broadest outlines. The marxist tradition, I quickly discovered, has been full unto overflowing with argument and controversy. At every step along the way, there have been sharp and lively debates centering around conflicting concepts and contending paths of development. As well as scientific, humanistic and historicist currents, there were anti-scientific, anti-humanist and anti-historicist currents.

---

With characteristic thoroughness (or, some might say, manic aspirations to omniscience), I set out to make the whole history of marxist thought and the whole history of the world communist movement fully my own.

On one level, this issued in a massive book entitled *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History*, a sweeping intellectual history in which I focused on the shifting nexus of science, philosophy and politics within marxism. I narrated a story of fierce ideological debate, analysed the philosophical issues involved and explored

their socio-historical contexts. In scrutinising these controversies, I examined the multiplicity of factors coming into play, including the impact of new scientific discoveries, new philosophical trends and new political developments.



The overall conclusion I reached in the book was that this was a rich and significant history, rooted in the impulse to work out a *weltanschauung* grounded in the most advanced science of its time and integrally connected to the struggle to create a new social order. I found it to be an audacious enterprise, which generated, not only impressive achievements, but also tragic disasters.

It was a story with a dark side as well as a bright one and I made every effort to see both in proper perspective, something the historiography of marxism glaringly lacked. For far too long, it had been polarised in terms of simple and one-sided extremes, in which there was, on the one side, a marxist history of marxism, which told only of the bright side, which was distorted with empty jargon, hollow self-praise, coy evasion and outright deceit, and, on the other side, an anti-marxist history of marxism, which told only of the dark side, which was equally distorted by being de-contextualised.

Working my way through this history in writing this book forced me to come to terms with various issues in a sharper way than I would have otherwise. There were times when I was quite shaken by what I realised I had to write. I defied the existing conventions, mentioned the unmentionable names and delved into matters that others believed should be let lie. I did so regretfully, even sorrowfully, for I could take no joy in the self-inflicted tragedies of the communist movement, as did anti-communist writers, who were, for the most part, the only ones to write about such things.

Shaken though I was, I could not turn the other way. Once again I felt that my own painfully evolved intellectual and moral standards were under assault, this time by certain tendencies within the communist movement, past and present. I disagreed totally with the premises underlying the tradition of sacrificing truth to a spurious notion of partisanship, in the name of which so many crimes against science and humanity had been committed. What sometimes began in relative innocence, posed as the sacrifice of some perhaps laudable principle for some supposedly necessary gain in the class struggle, led inevitably to erosion of all standards of rationality and morality, entrenchment of the habit of lying (even when it had nothing to do with the class struggle), destruction of trust and sheer human degradation, which outweighed any gains made by such methods.

The use of the categories of marxist philosophy to override the demands of rationality and morality could not but have a corrosive effect on the development of marxist philosophy. Thus the stale and dreary textbooks of dialectical and historical materialism, which gave the impression that all philosophical thinking had reached its finished form in the past and was authoritatively embodied in the interpretations and decisions of the party leadership. Thus too the heresy-hunting preoccupation with revisionism, used against those who wished to

carry on the process of philosophical thinking in the present and the fear of what conclusions might be reached by proceeding in accordance with considerations of rationality and morality.

---

On another level, my exploration of this terrain issued in another story in between the lines of the story told in the book and carrying it into experiences that were not long ago and far away but quite immediate and near to hand. I was haunted by other people's life stories, often told to me in confidence, and by questions they put to me about my own. My views on many matters evolved, reached points of crisis and then resolution. My relationship to marxism became more and more complicated. My relationship to the communist movement became more and more problematic.

I was an active and committed communist. I never believed that intellectual integrity required distance and detachment, as the prevailing academic ethos of objectivity would have it. On the contrary, I held to a participational theory of truth and believed that critical and creative thinking were enhanced by involvement and commitment. The fact that I was coming to terms with the communist movement for real and was passionately involved with it was epistemologically important for me and gave me an insight I would not have otherwise had, even if it also brought to a crisis, which I did not welcome.

I spent a great deal of time in Eastern Europe in the seventies. I probed beneath the surface as far as I could go, carving out a modus operandi in which I could go further than most foreigners, because I was a communist, and further than most communists, because I was a foreigner. I discovered forces that were fermenting in a process that would eventually issue in policies of glasnost and perestroika, although it was impossible at this time to see if and how that turning point would ever be reached, swamped as they often were by other forces.

The philosophical life of Eastern Europe had its signs of life and I emphasised these in defending it against the stereotypes I constantly encountered in the west, but I could not deny that it also had the shadow of death hanging over it as well. Article after article, book after book, covered the same ground in the same way, using the same formulations, the same quotes from the classics, the same ceremonial language. It dulled the mind and numbed the spirit. In Eastern Europe, I often encountered people who were amazed that I was a marxist when I didn't have to be, when it not only did not count for me in careerist terms, but actually counted against me. Indeed, they were surprised that I would even be interested in dialectical materialism, when I never had to have anything to do with it.

As I moved through these years from west to east and back again, I was caught in strong cross currents. In the east, there were what I had come to believe were the right answers, but often without any sense whatsoever of the questions. In the west, there was an acute sense of the questions, but with an equally acute paralysis about how to go about finding the answers and sometimes a furious flailing about seeking answers everywhere except where they were likely to be found.

There were, moreover, areas in which marxism remained woefully underdeveloped. Aside from its inability to deal honestly with its own history, a particularly serious failure in a historicist philosophy, there were also its failure to come to terms with the emergence of new social forces, its neglect of the whole field of human psychology, its inadequacy in dealing with the moral dimension. I believed strongly that marxism had within itself the capacity to illuminate these areas in a way that was superior to any other contenders, even those which dealt with these areas more directly.

It was also true to say that progressive movements outside the communist movement, particularly within some of the new social forces, had developed ideas that were in advance of the socialist countries. Eurocommunism at

its best represented an attempt to come to terms with such ideas and forces, although this was bitterly rejected in other enclaves of the communist movement. Within the CPI, when I proposed to do a marxist critique of certain radical feminist trends, I was told: "It is beneath the dignity of our party to answer such people."

Although in this case, I did get my way and I wrote *Communism and the Emancipation of Women*, I had more and more problems in the CPI. It all came to a head in 1979. First of all, there was the party congress, which I began to think was essentially a stage managed show undertaken for the edification of the fraternal delegates from Eastern Europe. When my branch put in a resolution critical of certain manifestations of stagnation in the party, we were put under severe pressure to withdraw it. The majority eventually caved in and agreed to do so. When I gave a speech at the congress incorporating such criticisms, the party came down on me like a ton of bricks, although no one refuted my arguments.

At the same time, I was enmeshed in a kafkaesque dispute with a Soviet editor in Prague, who had mangled beyond recognition the text of a paper I had given at a seminar co-sponsored by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and *World Marxist Review*. Despite my explicit and vehement refusal of consent, a text under my name, but utterly alien to me, was published in several languages and available in time for the World Congress of Philosophy in 1978 in a book entitled *Dialectical Materialism and Modern Science*. It was riddled with omissions, inaccuracies, illiteracies, jargon, logical contradictions, utter nonsense and views which were totally contrary to my own.

Moreover, I was told by the editor, that I could not mention such names as Lukacs, Colletti and Althusser, because only Hungarians could discuss Lukacs, only Italians could criticise Colletti, only French comrades could comment on Althusser, etc. I was told I should confine my criticisms to trends in Irish marxism. That was a sure fire way to reduce me to silence. As one marxist philosopher commented to me, it was a return to the 30 years war: *cujus regio, cujus religio*. It was necessary to hold to one interpretation of marxism in Moscow, another in Peiking, another in Milan, etc. Where did it leave me in Dublin ?

The general secretary of the CPI took his interpretation from Moscow. Studying philosophy in Moscow only conferred the right to praise it, but not the right to have a criticise it. To his mind, if a Soviet person and an Irish person were in conflict, the Soviet person must be right. That was it. There was no need to inquire further into the rights and wrongs of it. My protests to Prague received no reply, until a year later, when a letter was sent to the party full of overt lies and heresy-hunting slander. The general secretary proposed to the executive of the party that I be formally reprimanded for protesting to Prague and for discussing the matter with the representative of the CPGB. The executive overruled him, but I received a letter of reprimand nonetheless. He was not interested in the substantive issues and hadn't been in the least troubled when the CPI had published the original text.

Also during this period, I was on an academic lecture tour in America and attending a number of international conferences, where I was relentlessly hounded and heresy hunted by members of the CPUSA. They turned up in every audience, phoned me in every house where I stayed, broke into every conversation I held in an academic context, slandered marxists who were not party members and warned me against associating with them and threatened me when I did not comply. The slightest hint of any sort of criticism of the Soviet Union brought the charge that I was anti-soviet and doing the CIA's work for them. Nothing I had ever experienced in the CPI or in Eastern Europe was ever as bad as this. I resented this deeply.

In Ireland, I felt alone in my views. Whatever solidarity I found was abroad. I did not want to cut myself off from strong relationships I had formed in the CPGB, in the GDR and in other quarters of the world communist movement. I held on in the CPI, although I had more and more arguments, felt more and more alienated and missed more and more meetings.

I had already had crisis of faith and parting of ways enough for one life. The stance of dissident held no attraction to me. *The God That Failed* path was not one I wished to travel. At the same time, I was not going to have my character broken, as had others whose stories came flowing into mine. I would not accept the violation, in the name of communism, of the intellectual and moral values that had made me a communist in the first place.

I knew I had come to another crossroads and there was no turning back from it. There were two moments, both of them abroad, when the full weight of my dilemma came down upon me with particular force.

One was in Vienna. I had spent the whole morning talking the whole thing through with Adam Schaff, an older communist, who was ruthlessly honest with me, and a marxist philosopher, who understood the problems preoccupying me. It had been a seering sort of encounter and I felt quite shaken as I walked away reflecting on it, as if powerful world-historical rhythms were converging and convulsing within me. Then suddenly I came across the Austrian army band playing the Soviet national anthem. Just ahead of me stood Carter and Brezhnev, who were in Vienna for the SALT talks. I felt my whole life pass in front of me, having been fully a part of the one world and then of the other, but feeling that the comforts of both had been taken from me. I was torn with ambiguity, which was a still a far cry from neutrality. I felt I had faced the worst and I was still a communist, although it was clear to me that I had to learn to be a communist without the marching bands, without *World Marxist Review*, and, if it came to it, without the CPI.

It did come to it.

The second incident was in Toronto. I came across a poster announcing a public lecture with my name on it, followed by Communist Party of Ireland. I remembered how I had felt about that identification in the beginning, so proud, so willing to risk everything for it. Suddenly, I felt the way I had felt many years before. Then too I knew that I had come to a crossroads and that it was time to make a decision. I decided. The designation on that poster did not fit me anymore just as the name Sister Helen Eugenie didn't fit me anymore.

I did not renew my membership in the CPI in 1980. However, I still felt a rush of ambiguity and tinge of exclusion at the thought of the world communist movement.

I could not walk away from it so easily as had others, for in was in my own home. *The Irish Socialist* was laid out on the same table as I wrote my books and served the dinner. Every other time I answered the phone, it concerned party business. For my children, raging ideological debates about the nazi-soviet pact and the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party were more normal than arguments about washing up or grocery lists. Leaving the party for me meant leaving home in more ways than one.

---

I joined the Labour Party in 1981. I often looked around the room at a Labour Party meeting and saw other ex-CPI members and realized how different we were from the rest. We had a philosophy of history, a firmer grounding, a longer view than those around us.

The dominant debate within the Labour Party in Ireland paralleled that in the Labour Party in Britain and in many other such parties throughout the world during this period. There was the social democratic view, which was making much of the rhetoric of not clinging to socialist dogmas of the past and adopting a new realism, adapting to new times to justify what was essentially a retreat from the keynesian post-war consensus to varieties of monetarism with a human face. Then there was the democratic socialist view, which proposed a more systematic analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the social order generated by it and a more

radical vision of a socialism as a systemic alternative to it, bridged by an attempt to work out a strategy for moving from the one to the other.

Although we could find some common ground on short and even medium term demands, the social democratic view could see no further. They perceived neither capitalism nor socialism in systemic terms. They accepted the terms of the dominant discourse with respect to the national debt and the need for drastic cuts in public spending, only engaging in special pleading on behalf of the poor and the weak and arguing that they could manage the system better.

It was a discourse about the needs of consumers rather than about the rights of producers. It was a discourse innocent of concepts such as class (never mind class struggle), division of labour and mode of production. It had no strong inner core. Everything was ad hoc, all bits and pieces, particularistic problems matched with particularistic solutions, in patchier and ever more threadbare proposals for piecemeal social engineering.

In practice, they settled for even less in the harsh political realities of the eighties, justifying Labour Party participation in coalition government through much of the decade simply in terms of protecting what they called the weaker sections of the community (not the working class) against the worst that Fine Gael might do otherwise.

I was part of a group called Labour Left, which opposed coalition throughout the eighties. We also organised educational events that sought to raise the level of debate in the party beyond immediate policy issues to deal with the history of the left and alternative political philosophies.

---

All such debates on the left were swamped, however, by the massive world wide shift to the right in the 1980s. A tidal wave of reaction overtook the progressive advances of previous decades in a blatant backlash against socialism, feminism, secularism and virtually every cause ever championed by the left. So thoroughgoing was the onslaught of the new right that monetarism was taken on as the common sense of the era. Even those with most to lose accepted its masking of the structural inequality of class with the illusory equality of equivalent exchange on the marketplace and its identification of the strident selfishness, which it made ideologically respectable, with the public good.

The 1980s were hard times for the left. We sometimes felt washed out and left high and dry on abandoned shores by the receding tide. We were dismissed as dinosaurs in a new decade for which we seemed ill-adapted. We smarted with the pathos of the world moving on in a direction so disdainful of our desires. The same world, which had once seemed so malleable in our hands, became so recalcitrant and so resistant to our touch.

Not only had history turned on us in this way, but we had to acknowledge that we helped to turn it on a course that doubled back on us and led to consequences that were the opposite of what we intended. The post-war consensus of liberal rationalism and social reform, underpinning the edifice of the welfare state and public enterprise, which we attacked from the left, then came under far fiercer attack from the right. The new left played a major part in undermining it and creating the vacuum, into which stepped the new right, who turned it to very different ends.

Post-war capitalism represented a compromise with socialism, resulting both from the pressure of progressive forces and the interests of enlightened capitalist development. It provided the stability it needed to hold its ground and to advance, but it also made inroads into the rate of profitability and gave scope to new destabilising forces.

In response, there came an attempt to reorganise the system and to restore a more acceptable rate of profitability, in a new cycle of capital accumulation made possible by internationalisation of the world economy, deregulation of market forces and use of new technology, bringing new patterns of production, distribution and exchange and new forms of labour and social relations. Unprecedented centralisation at the top was masked by a great flurry of decentralisation at the bottom, squeezing out the middle level of forces, which were heretofore at the centre of power. Simultaneous globalisation and localisation displaced nationalisation. Thus the dismantling of nationalised industry and the privatisation of the public sector, the erosion of the power base of the trade union movement, indeed the growing powerlessness of the nation state itself in the face of stateless money.

With the forces at work becoming ever more faceless and distant and with the overall process seeming so impenetrable and out of reach, the attempt to understand the world and to get a grip on it gave way to various ideological strategies, from premodernism to postmodernism, functioning either to evade or to justify the impenetrability and dislocation.

Some retreated to old certainties and to an appeal to supernatural intervention to take external control of a world with no apparent means of internal control. While satellites whirled in orbit overhead, much of Ireland retreated into its peasant past and fixed its gaze upon a dark world where plaster statues moved and muttered messages for mankind. Flights from Knock to Medjugorje symbolised Ireland's ironic mixture of apparitions and airplanes.

Ireland was not alone in manifesting confused and contradictory ways of combining old and new, of welding anachronistic traditions to advanced technologies. The US spawned a plethora of fundamentalist evangelists preaching born-again christianity, creationist biology and reactionary politics, all via satellite broadcasting. A society that mastered silicon chips, lazer surgery, supersonic transport, satellites and space shuttles fantasised itself as Rambo. The most sophisticated cinematography produced the silly supernaturalism of ET. The most complex technology was enlisted in the headlong flight from complexity into simple images, which were infantile, but by no means ideologically innocent. It was a society whose technological capacity had far outstripped its wisdom.

---

Anyone looking to academe for wisdom would be sadly disappointed. Anyone attending academic conferences was confronted with a babel of incommensurable discourses, for virtually every academic discipline was in crisis. From philosophy to physics, from literary criticism to economics, every discipline was rent by extreme polarisation, not only on specific issues, but reaching to the very theoretical foundations of the discipline. In fact, the nearer to questions of theoretical foundations, the deeper the crisis and the more extreme the polarisation.

The natural sciences, once thought to be the rock bottom of our knowledge, were declared to be only a discontinuous succession of incommensurable paradigms, in respect of which questions of truth or falsity, rationality or irrationality, could not meaningfully be raised. This left no criteria for judging between one theory and another. Meanwhile, experiments proceeded and empirical data accumulated, but it became more difficult to know how it all added up, what the overall shape of it was. The natural sciences were in the grip of an escalating specialisation, which made it almost impossible for scientists to understand what was being said by scientists within the subdivisions of their own discipline, let alone other disciplines.

The social sciences were in worse chaos. Discussions on matters of some substance and importance inevitably swung between extremes of voluntarism and determinism, nativism and environmentalism, realism and

conventionalism, etc. One encountered everything from the airiest, anti-empirical, rootless theoreticism to the most pedestrian, simple-minded, fact-gathering empiricism. Every sort of false dichotomy proliferated.

Never before in human history had there been so much empirical research. Never before had there been so many contradictory ideas and contending theories in the air. Never before had there been such confusion, such despair, such intellectual and moral chaos. There was no point in turning to the philosophers. There was so much to know and it had become so complicated to know what it was to know that philosophers despaired of knowing and urged us all to renounce the notion of philosophy as a foundational discipline, much less a constructive one.

Philosophy was in the worst state of all. There was no consensus regarding its nature, its scope, its aims, its methods, its subject matter, its relation to other disciplines or to anything else, indeed its very right to exist. There was no agreement on how to interpret its past history, how to analyse its present situation, how to conceive of its future prospects. In a situation in which philosophy departments were being closed down, philosophers themselves put the defense of the discipline on very shaky ground.

Going from session to session at an international philosophy conference, I could find everything from the heady freedom of goodmanian ways of world-making to the no-two-ways-about-it necessity of kripkean rigid designators; from the sober enterprise of lakatosian rational reconstruction to the carefree world of foucaultian deconstruction and feyerabendian dadaism; from the barest of neo-fregean formalisms to the polymorphous perversity of wittgensteinian language games.

While some philosophers built careers announcing the death of philosophy, others proceeded as if there were no problem, retreating into one of the sub-trends of the sub-divisions of the discipline, existing professionally within a re-assuring and self-enclosed network of self-validating texts, which never needed to be justified in terms of anything outside itself. Some contented themselves with antiquarian scholarship and wrote one more book on Plato, Berkeley or Hegel. Others went for facile relevance in service courses on philosophy of sport, of business ethics, of sexual desire, etc. Still others wallowed in the obscurantism of Derrida and difference or whatever nouveau melange was sweeping the Parisian cafes at the moment.

Never had such a torrent of words, so many reams of paper, yielded so little illumination. Beneath all the tedium posing as rigour, beneath all the paraphernalia of rationality covering the most grotesque irrationalism, there was massive failure of nerve on the part of the era's intellectuals.

---

Coming into the 1990s, across all disciplines, there was a kind of settling down, but without anything having been solved. At an international conference, I probed various people for an explanation of how and why the mood at this conference seemed different, more low key, less polemical, less polarised, than the previous two conferences. One said to me that it was a time of consolidation after a time of paradigm shifts. I said: consolidation of what? Another said to me that people were worn down from confrontation and running for cover in a period of reaction.

The edge has gone off the arguments between conflicting paradigms, but the confrontation had given way only to a low-level eclecticism. The situation might have been less polemical and less polarised, but it was no less problematic. The only difference seemed to be that people learned to live with the problems unresolved or to settle for resolution at a less than fundamental level.

Much of my work in the eighties and into the nineties was devoted to analysing this crisis in contemporary intellectual life and to probing the socio-historical roots of this epistemological paralysis, this ontological despair, in the fragmentation and confusion of contemporary experience. I was fascinated by the parallel ways in which this deeply rooted malaise played itself out within a number of academic disciplines and also within the wider sphere of popular culture.

Everywhere I found the same parallel trends: the plodding particularity on the one hand and the deconstructionist exotica on the other. Despite the enormous gap between the unreflective simplicity of the one and the hyper-reflexive complexity of the other, both fell back on a pluralism of particulars, of random fragments of experience that could not be unified. Whether it was a modernist belief in autonomous subjectivity or postmodernist pronouncements of the death of the subject, both reflected the inability to integrate experience and to achieve any sort of socio-historical perspective.

Such parallel trends raised the question: What was it about our times that produced such intellectual fragmentation? Why the persistence of so many false dichotomies? Why all these pronouncements that there were no laws, that there was no truth, that there was no meaning, that there was no progress, that there was neither an inner world of psyche nor outer world of nature or history? Why were we told that we have witnessed the death of philosophy, that we had come to the end of epistemology, the end of aesthetics, the end of ethics?

It was my belief that there was something in the very essence of the present social order, which structurally inhibited integrated thinking, which undermined the very foundations of rationality and sanity and morality. There was something at the very core of contemporary experience, which blocked access to totality, which kept theory flying so far from experience and experience groping so helplessly in the dark. Capitalism penetrated to the very core of personality. Only by breaking its boundaries, only by penetrating to the very source of the society's inner tensions and perceiving the mechanism generating the fragmentation, only by naming the system and taking it on, can the way beyond it be discerned.

Postmodernism in particular bore witness to the disintegrative power of late capitalism. The fact that it took hold within the left was symptomatic of the left's paralysis in the face of the impenetrability and complexity of contemporary capitalism.

---

It was the integrative power of marxism which has gave me the composure and conviction I needed to resist all disintegrative pressures and to persist in striving to see the totality against all forces ranged against it.

Those who renounced any sort of drive towards totalising historical perspective in the name of marxism only muddied the already muddy waters, whatever their intentions. In some cases, they were so overanxious to avoid the distortions of economic reductionism as to negate the role of economics altogether and to make every sphere so autonomous as to dissolve the pattern of interconnections making marxism what it distinctively was.

The crisis of marxism in these times grew out of the detotalising pressures of the age as well as of reaction to a fossilised totality. The phenomenon called post-marxism testified both to the need for further development of the tradition and a paralysis before the task of doing so.

The conceptualisation of class and the role of class struggle in relation to the emergence of new social movements was an area in which underdevelopment gave way to great confusion. A false dichotomy emerged between a workerist caricature of class and class struggle and a declassed pluralism of alternative political

subjects with alternative agenda, which led, not only to intellectual disintegration, but also to the political decollectivisation of the dispossessed.

Once the totality came unravelled and core concepts such as class and mode of production were let to fall, there was only the pluralism of public opinion polls, the born-again discovery of the complexity of the market, the justification of conspicuous consumption, with special pleading for compassion for the underprivileged and collective provision for basic needs tacked on, the preference for alliances to the right and the burning of bridges to the left. I did not mind the ads for t-shirts, mugs and futons in *Marxism Today*, but I did find the wider and deeper political shift in orientation from production to consumption profoundly disturbing.

A society or a movement without a work ethic was on the slide to decadence. Without the demand for participation in the labour force, movements (including feminism) degenerated into demands to consume without producing, into justification of parasitism, whether high or low, whether male or female. Without the link between production and consumption, there was only mystification and market segmentation and share ownership and the varieties of aristocratic / bourgeois / lumpen parasitism, where there should be the dignity of labour and the earned right to participate and to consume and to share in the culture of the ages.

Whatever marxism was, it was a totalising historical perspective. It was the only mode of thought able to give a coherent, comprehensive and credible account of the complexity of contemporary experience. It was the only coherent analysis of the capitalist mode of production and how it structurally generated, not only the maximum expropriation of surplus value, but maximum dissolution of social bonds, involving decreasing access to totality and increasing atomisation of thought processes. It was the only credible analysis of an alternative mode of production, proposing socialism, not only as a radical restructuring of the relations of production, but as a fundamental transformation of patterns of thought and forms of social organisation.

Integrated thinking, which touched all the bases, was not possible within the logic of capitalism. An alternative social order was a necessary social matrix for an integrated world view, but an integrated world view was necessary to challenge the present social order effectively and to bring an alternative one into being. We needed to build the new in the shell of the old, putting the whole weight of our lives into mapping and moulding the spirit of the age, engaging in comprehensive and consequential thinking, taking on all conflicting trends and working to win consent to an alternative future.

Too many gave an unworthy reading to the brave and brilliant Gramsci, taking up only pessimism of the intellect but not optimism of the will, emphasising the theory of hegemony without the commitment to building a counterhegemonic bloc. What was left of the left sometimes seemed to be reduced to cursing the darkness rather than lighting up as much space as their powers allowed. Worse still, others attacked the power source.

Marxism was marginalised in the eighties. Indeed, in many quarters, it seemed to have disappeared. I regularly found myself in academic, cultural and political circles where I was the only marxist present. But I did not feel like a dinosaur ill-adapted to this age. I may have refused to flow with the tide of yuppie hustle and postmodernist pastiche, but I adapted according to my own lights. I had no problem with the filofaxes, the computers and sparking water, although I drew the line at shoulder pads. More importantly, I thought in a way that gave me a better grip on the times. I might have been personally marginalised, because I was still a marxist, but I was nevertheless better adapted on a deeper level, because I had a way of understanding and dealing with the age, however unfashionably, that was denied to those thrown up by it, but who did not understand it, changing with every fashion, but having no inner core to hold them together from one fashion to the next.

---

Counterbalancing the onslaught from the new right in the west, there came later in the eighties new hope from the east. Even amidst the upheavals of 1989, it was still possible to believe that the promise of glasnost and perestroika would be fulfilled, that the time had come for socialism with political democracy, socialism with economic efficiency, socialism with a flourishing civil society. We spoke with such fervour of socialism with a human face, with an outstretched hand, with a fresh and truthful voice.

By the early nineties it had become clear that this was not to be, not for this period of history. What we were witnessing was not the renewal of socialism but the restoration of capitalism. Those of us who were not going to run for cover, change sides or collapse in confusion had to ask ourselves some hard questions.

It was within the intellectual traditions of this very movement that I found the resources for dealing with developments that this movement never anticipated. I refer in particular to the habit of large-scale thinking that dealt with the concrete flow of history and sought the deeper patterns in it. It was necessary to ask: Must societies of premature socialism return to capitalism in order for there to be any chance of mature socialism in the future? In the period of perestroika, I thought not, but now it seemed so. The pressure of an increasingly integrated global capitalism upon any sphere outside its hegemony was, I believe, the major force bringing the downfall of the socialist bloc. It seemed that capitalism must develop fully on a global scale before socialism could come into its own.

There were moments of great joy in these days of hope: seeing the Berlin wall breached, forbidden books returning to the bookshops, multi-party elections, prisoners becoming presidents and prime ministers and vice versa. Nevertheless it gave way to a time of grief and loss. In the GDR I saw everything open up only to close down again, as Modrow was replaced by De Maziere and then Kohl in the massive hostile takeover that was German unification. Junker aristocrats returned to reclaim their vast estates. Karl-Marx-Stadt became Chemnitz again. The USSR too fell. Leningrad became St Petersburg again. Throughout Eastern Europe a population educated under materialism and socialism cried out for miracles and monarchs. Catholic indoctrination was reintroduced into the curriculum in Poland.

In my comings and goings from Eastern Europe in those days, I often passed through London. I saw their monstrous mounted monarchs set in stone and bronze and unchallenged and looking as if set to stand forever, while all the icons of our movement were being torn down in derision or smashed or smeared with rude graffiti. Standing in the ruins of our overturned utopia, I grieved for much in our lives that died. I missed the GDR. I missed Yugoslavia. I missed the USSR. I was unrepentant for my defense of them. I was proud to have been a part of this movement and I was also proud to have been a difficult and disruptive presence in it. No one could take this from me. But we had to move on. The problems which gave rise to the socialist movement had not been solved and we needed to find a new way to move forward from our past into our future.

---

It often seemed as if history were moving backwards, but history only moves forward, even if in unanticipated, paradoxical, exceedingly complex ways. It moves forward not in a clear straight line. It zigzags. We struggle up a hill and then fall back. We take ground we cannot hold, at least not then. We retreat and we advance.

I think that we should relate collectively to the past of the socialist movement as we do personally to our own youth: as a time of naivete, excessive zeal, utopian flight, rash experiment, brash miscalculation, false friends; a time of healthy growth of instincts, which time would temper and further experience refine; a time of glory and terror and tragedy; a time of vulnerability and pain, spared those who dared not venture along such a dangerous road.

We should be proud that we lived it and risked it and grew in wisdom, age and grace from it; proud that we were not among the small and selfish, tending only our own gardens; proud that we were not among the smug and cynical, carping on the sidelines, but contributing nothing. They pointed and said 'I told you so', but they knew nothing then and they know nothing now.

---

Marxism might have been marginalised, but it has not been refuted. There is still nothing to match it in explanatory power or moral vision.

Marxism has illuminated every experience I have had and every body of empirical data I have undertaken to analyse and to synthesise. It has also given me perspective and stamina, a way of taking a long view and pacing myself for the long haul, which has seen me through many personal trials and political tribulations.

In this sense, it has provided me with resources I have needed to evolve a sound spirituality. I know that others, both marxists and non-marxists, do not see marxism in this way. Many have seen it as Senghor:

"What embarrassed us in Marxism was, along with its atheism, a certain disdain for spiritual values: this discursive reason pushed to its outermost limits turned into a materialism without warmth, into a blind determinism."

According to another author:

"Marx has a great vision of man. He wants him to be liberated from all oppressive structures and alienation ... However, denying God, Marx cannot see the unique and special dignity which God alone can guarantee. Because he denies God, Marx makes man small and miserable."

I do not believe that the dignity of man / woman needs to be guaranteed by the existence of God. The human struggle is not made smaller but larger without divine creation or divine reward. It is far more unique and special to have emerged from the mud and the dark into the highest reaches of human consciousness than to have been fashioned by the mind of a divine creator. It is far more heroic to be moral for the sake of being moral than to expect any further reward or punishment.

Atheism / materialism does not imply disdain for spiritual values. Rationality does not imply lack of warmth. Marxism does not cut me off from anything except false consolation. It excludes nothing of value in the whole range of human experience. It not only allows me to soar the heights and probe the depths of human experience, but provides me with the only solid foundation for doing so.

The only source of a sound spirituality is a sound world view. I do not believe that any pre-thought philosophy, named by someone else's name (whether it be Buddha or Christ or Marx) can provide this. It must grow within the living tissue of experience and organically incorporate whatever insight and strength it can from whatever sources. No tantra or catechism or textbook of dialectical materialism can substitute for this painful and protracted process.

It is only in this sense that I would hesitate to characterise myself as a marxist, for my world view is my own. Even acknowledging my sources of inspiration, Marx was only one man. However, we struggle to come to terms with a common world and, in doing so, we locate ourselves within existing intellectual traditions and political movements.

Although I do not normally use the term 'spirituality', except when talking about the past or being asked to address it in the present, I can see the continuity between what I called spirituality when I was younger and what I now call by a host of other names: intellectual, emotional, moral integration, holism, composure, insight, vision, depth. It is being at one with myself. It is a complexly wrought composure at the very core of myself, a synthesis of all I have gathered and space for all I may yet gather, which is firmly rooted and yet open ended. It is an intellectual, emotional, moral clarity, which has carried me through difficult times and will carry me through whatever difficult times might still be in store.

---

I have no doubt that there will be difficult times ahead. I no longer believe that victory is inevitable, only that it just might be possible. I don't know if socialism will triumph in the future, only that it is the only future worth triumphing and that struggling for it is the only way worth living in the meantime.

For me, socialism is about everything. An economist / reductionist / soulless caricature of socialism as one enormous conformist factory is the substitution of a badly-drawn, black and white, two-dimensional diagram for the richness, colour and vitality of a full-blooded, three-dimensional life world. Socialism is a movement, not only for the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, but for the total transformation of human energies. Socialism is not only a different way of organising our economic activity, but a whole different way of thinking, experiencing, creating and coming together. Socialism is the only system able to give full scope to the full flowering of human personality, strong in the dignity that comes only from labour, reconciled to nature and to society. Socialism enables us to come together in our fullness and at our best, instead of preying upon each other in competition, dissipation and despair. Socialism is the fulfillment of our materiality and our spirituality. Socialism is bread and roses and much more.

Such is the way I have come, where I now stand and the way I intend to proceed.

---

home page: <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehanh/sheehan.htm>

e-mail: [helena.sheehan@dcu.ie](mailto:helena.sheehan@dcu.ie)

doras index: [http://doras.dcu.ie/view/people/Sheehan,\\_Helena.html](http://doras.dcu.ie/view/people/Sheehan,_Helena.html)

---