2 Crosland and Marx

The conflict between labour and capital is central to Marx’s economics. Property-owners greedy for surplus value confront a surplus proletariat with nothing but its labour-power to sell. The affluence of the few presupposes the deprivation of the many; the workers become the impoverished victims of ‘misery, oppression, slavery, degredation, exploitation’;¹ and the end of systemic antagonisms can only come with the abolition of private capital itself. To Marx, in other words, capitalism means capital and socialism is impossible unless and until ‘the knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.’² Capitalism to Marx means the private ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Socialism to Marx means the transcendence of the particular and the socialisation of the claims. Socialism to Crosland does not.

Crosland’s socialism is not Marx’s socialism. The differences between the approaches are the subject of this chapter, which compares the two world-views under the five familiar headings of Basis and Superstructure, Class and Conflict, Political Democracy, Economic Inefficiency and Social Solidarity. The theme of this chapter is the revisionist’s conviction that there is a limit to the useful guidance that can be obtained by the present from the classic orthodoxies of the past: ‘Keir Hardie cannot provide, any more than can the Gracchi, the right focus with which to capture the reality of the mid-twentieth-century world.’³ The theme of this chapter is most of all the revisionist’s credo that there is in no case a greater need to discard the older socialisms than where the inspiration is that of Marx: ‘In my view Marx has little or nothing to offer the contemporary socialist, either in respect of practical policy, or of the current analysis of our society, or even of the right conceptual tools or framework. His prophecies have been almost without exception falsified, and his conceptual tools are now quite inappropriate.’⁴ Crosland does not say how much of Marxism might have been relevant at the time, a century earlier, when Marx was writing. He does not need to do so. Crosland’s concern is the future of socialism and not its past.

Crosland repeatedly indicated that ‘Marxism is a wash-out’.⁵ His position is clear but not so his reasons for returning so frequently to an ideology which by 1956 not a single British socialist of any importance was still prepared to endorse. Thomas Balogh, reviewing the New Fabian Essays in 1952, had already expressed his surprise at the extent to which
the contributors were determined to refute a view that only a fringe con­
tinued to espouse: 'A ridiculously exaggerated value is given to Com­munist opinion in Britain.' Marxism was a fringe interest but Crosland nonetheless chose to treat it as a serious contender. Before the five principal differences between the two world-views can properly be examined, it will evidently be necessary to explain why Crosland devoted more space to laying a ghost that had already been laid than he did to analysing the philosophy of any genuine alternative to revisionist social­ism, Left like Morris or Right like Hayek. The first section of this chapter, headed Marx and his Mission, seeks to establish why it was that Crosland returned so frequently to an ideology which the later sections show him consistently to have regarded as little more than the economic sociology of a capitalism that was gone.

2.1 MARX AND HIS MISSION

By 1941, Crosland had come to the conclusion that he was most definitely not a Marxist. A letter to Philip Williams in August of that year reveals that Crosland by the age of 23 had arrived at the position with respect to Marx and Engels that was to last him a lifetime: 'I am now broadly of the opinion that we to-day have nothing whatsoever to learn from the whole corpus of M & E's writings, with the one important exception of their basic view of history as a dynamic process to be viewed as a perpetual change in the class structure of society, due to changing methods of production. Every other theory they ever held is, to me, largely valueless to­day, most of them because the premisses are no longer true.'

Crosland arrived early at his mature position that Marx's predictions had largely been left behind by events. He did so in the context of a rad­icalised, politicised Oxford in which unemployment and depression, Hitler's Fascism and Stalin's Plan, the threat of war and the possibility of invasion, had compelled even the aesthetes and the sybarites to take an unprecedented interest in social questions. No ivory tower could insulate itself from the sombre world outside – or from the tendency, common among affluent intellectuals, to blame the capitalist system for the tragedy of the 1930s: 'The natural instinct was therefore to the Left ... Montparnasse proved less of a magnet than 16 King St. From being dépaysés, they became déclassés.' Crosland was a classics student at Trinity from 1937 to 1940. In 1949 he evoked the excitement of those for­mative years in the following words: 'We trooped religiously off to Labour Club meetings every Friday night, pausing only to spit through the