

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CSE

Hugo Radice

ORIGINS

The CSE had its origins in the resurgence of the socialist movement in Britain in the second half of the 1960s: the growth of the shop stewards' movement, the rapid disillusion with the Wilson government, opposition to the war in Vietnam, the women's movement, the student movement. This resurgence demanded a critical economics capable of understanding what was happening in British and world capitalism, and contributing to the development of effective working-class strategy and tactics.

At the same time, bourgeois economics seemed less and less able to offer any coherent understanding of the world. Socialists who were studying, teaching or applying economics found the orthodox analyses increasingly useless. In the realm of 'high theory', the capital-theory controversy appeared at the time to be undermining neoclassical theory, while the complacent 'post-Keynesian synthesis' was falling apart in the face of growing unemployment and inflation, international monetary disorder and imperialist war in Vietnam. The economics of the 'Cambridge school' and 'neo-Ricardianism' opened up a bridge towards renewed interest in Marxism, pioneered by writers like Baran and Sweezy, Mandel and Kidron.

By the late 1960s, therefore, there were a growing number of socialist economists who both felt an urgent need to develop a useful and relevant socialist critique, and were steadily abandoning orthodox economics. Within the various parties and groups on the left, economic issues assumed a new importance, but there seemed to be very few adequate answers to the questions raised: why was British capitalism declining? Why was inflation increasing? What were the implications of EEC membership, or the breakdown of Bretton Woods?

One aspect of the growth of the left was a new concern with overcoming its fragmentation. The influx of a new generation less moulded by

sectarianism had a lot to do with this, but just as important was the practical co-operation of militants in the anti-Vietnam mobilisations and the fight against the Labour government's trade union legislation. The May Day Manifesto group, formed in 1966, was a good example of the new mood, as was the Institute for Workers' Control. Then in March 1969 the MDM and others called a Convention of the Left in an attempt to accelerate the process. One of its 'commissions' brought together various economists to try to develop some perspectives on economic policy, and at the IWC conference in April there was informal discussion on the same lines. While direct attempts at left unity seemed doomed to failure, we thought that a more practical and narrow focus could avoid the pitfalls of sectarianism and make a useful contribution. Over the summer, a self-appointed committee (Sam Aaronovitch, Robin Murray, Bob Rowthorn and myself) issued a call for contributions, wrote to everyone we could think of, and organised a Conference of Socialist Economists for January 1970.

ESTABLISHMENT, 1970-71

The first conference was attended by 75 people, mainly economists, who discussed papers on the capital theory controversy, the state of development economics, and the internationalisation of capital. We then elected a committee to plan a second conference on the economic role of the state in modern capitalism. This took place in Cambridge in October 1970, attracted 125 participants (including 20 from abroad), and discussed 18 papers, some of a general nature and others dealing with specific aspects of state intervention. The conference decided to set up the CSE as a permanent organisation, to organise a further conference on Britain and the EEC, and to investigate launching a journal. After some predictable organisational hassles, we were able to hold the conference in London in December 1971, and simultaneously launch the *Bulletin of the CSE*, with the first issue containing four of the conference papers.

By this time, it was clear that we had a strong enough nucleus of activists to sustain an annual conference and a bulletin: local groups got underway, notably at Sussex and Warwick universities, and the newly-elected Co-ordinating Committee was asked to organise dayschools on topics of particular interest. But what was the CSE like? First, the membership of around 200 was nearly all in higher education, and mostly economists. Secondly, the atmosphere was certainly non-sectarian, with none of the identifiable tendencies (CP, IS, 'old New Left', etc.) trying to lay down a line. Thirdly, we already had a lot of valuable international contacts and overseas members. Fourthly, right from the start there was a strong feeling that CSE should avoid becoming too hierarchical, aiming for an active, not a passive, membership and integrating administrative tasks into CSE work in general: for example, the early issues of the *Bulletin* relied on authors for typing and on rank-and-file members for production and distribution, using virtually no paid labour.

'THE TURN TO MARXISM', 1972-75

The main question facing us in our work by 1972 was what we meant by 'socialist economics'. After the conference on the EEC, many members felt that our attempts to understand contemporary capitalism had to move beyond an eclectic theoretical basis which often amounted to no more than radical Keynesianism. Although we continued to work on critiques of bourgeois economics, the main thrust over the next three years was towards a more clearly defined and properly understood Marxist basis for our work. This came to encompass debates on the theories of value, productive and unproductive labour, crisis and imperialism. These became the main focus of the *Bulletin*, of dayschools (such as the June 1973 Brighton dayschool on value) and of annual conferences (December 1972 on crisis, January 1974 on imperialism). Although many of these debates were as old as Marxism itself, it was the first time they had been actively worked on in Britain by more than a handful of isolated scholars: this was a collective process of self-education which was enormously valuable, however esoteric it may have seemed sometimes, and despite the fact that a number of non-Marxist and non-academic CSE members dropped out as a result. And although the debates led to a certain polarisation of views, for and against the more or less orthodox positions based on the logic of Marx's analysis of value and capital, this polarisation did not undermine the valuable features of the CSE which I have already mentioned.

Despite the seeming dominance of theoretical work in this period, the *Bulletin* also published 'current analysis' articles, on Ireland, South Africa and Brazil as well as on Britain. Indeed, contributors like Andrew Glyn, John Harrison, Ben Fine and Laurence Harris were precisely trying to see how far the analysis of the British crisis could both make use of, and shed light on, the theoretical debates. Equally important was the development of the first working groups, on housing and on the political economy of women. There was continual debate on the problem of CSE practice: how to push forward CSE work in forms which could, as we always intended, contribute to the working class movement. This pre-occupation was hardly surprising given the accelerating tempo of militancy during the Heath government's period in office.

In organisational terms, CSE was expanding and consolidating. Membership rose steadily towards 500, and its non-sectarian and international character remained striking. With the move towards the positive development of Marxist work, rather than the critique of bourgeois economics, a growing number of non-economists joined. The Co-ordinating Committee spawned subcommittees which then became the Editorial Board of the *Bulletin* and the Conference Arrangements Committee. The CSE Newsletter was established, and the *Bulletin* became printed rather than duplicated, although it never went on public sale. However, within this burgeoning administrative structure and workload several problems began to surface. Perhaps the most difficult, at least for me as CSE Secretary, was the unavoidable splitting of the workload into routine administration (membership, finance, etc.) and work on the *Bulletin*. The administrators tended to see the editors as a flighty bunch, given to

ignoring budgets and to obscure disputations: at one time the two theoretical tendencies (for and against 'orthodox' Marxism) had a 'negative veto' system for approving articles, so that the minority view—whichever it happened to be at any point—was not excluded! The editorial board felt that their work too was often tedious and routine, and complained often with justification of inefficiencies in the administration. The other problem was the difficulty of maintaining a steady flow of consultation and information between the 'centre' and the few, often short-lived working groups and local groups at the base. The centre could never legislate collective work into being, and got frustrated with the unavoidable tendencies of groups to regroup, branch out, or die without telling them; the groups often became inward-looking and self-sufficient, and not surprisingly regarded their own work as much more important than communicating with a distant and not very supportive centre.

TRANSFORMATION AND GROWTH, 1976-77

The April 1975 annual conference departed from tradition in being based on the work of working groups, rather than a central theme. Less coherent and less stimulating in some ways, it presaged a major shift in emphasis in CSE, and a period of rapid change and growth. It was decided to hold the 1976 conference on the theme of the labour process, and to make it a residential weekend conference held outside London. The Conference Committee soon began to play a much more active role than before. It broadened into a representative body co-ordinating a number of local and working groups, which decided to prepare for the conference through consistent collective work. New members were drawn in, partly as a result of the choice of subject (people involved in trade union work, labour historians, and some interested in the ideas of the Italian 'school' around Potere Operaio, Lotta Continua, etc.), and partly because more non-economists were realising the importance of the critique of political economy.

The July 1976 conference brought over 250 members to Coventry, and the great efforts made in preparatory work paid off in the liveliness of the debates. In the general enthusiasm we decided to transform the *Bulletin* into a printed journal, named it *Capital and Class*, and agreed to aim for a large growth in membership with the economics of printing allowing a big fall in membership subscription rates. In order to link this up with the growing emphasis on collective work, we set up a new sort of 'Editorial Board for the journal consisting of delegates from all recognised 'base groups' and from 'affiliated' groups and journals abroad, with the job of setting overall editorial policy and ensuring the flow of material to the journal: the practical editorial work was delegated to a small Editorial Committee.

By July 1977, when 400 members gathered in Bradford for the conference on 'Class Struggle, the State and the Restructuring of Capital', we were pretty much on our way. *Capital and Class* was off the ground,

membership was heading for 1,000 and the conference itself attracted over 80 papers, many from working groups and local groups. The publication of two pamphlets the previous year (*The Labour Process and Class Struggles* and *On the Political Economy of Women*) led to a further decision with great implications, the launching of a book series based on a book club, and a new committee was set up to prepare this.

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

The 1976 Conference was thus a major turning point: since then CSE has continued to grow and to change, but with a greater degree of continuity. Membership growth has slowed down, with roughly 1,300 members in 1979 although we still have about 30% overseas membership, and occasional contact with a wide range of groups and journals abroad, the international dimension of CSE has been neglected recently. The size and complexity of CSE's administration has increased disproportionately, especially with the launching of *Capital and Class* and *CSE Books*: probably over 50 members are active as officers or on the various committees. Our conferences in 1978 (Bradford) and 1979 (Leeds) had 500 or more participants, 100-odd papers and ever-longer titles. Over 40 local and working groups have functioned for at least some time during the past two years.

But what does it all add up to? I think that most of us would still agree on the original aims which we suggested in 1969: to develop the critique of political economy and the analysis of contemporary society, within and for the socialist movement. This implies trying to forge a practical unity between our intellectual activity and political intervention in the labour movement, in local politics and in national politics.

This begs the question of what *sort* of politics we're aiming at. Historically, the CSE clearly developed in opposition to the sort of social-democracy represented by Crosland, Wilson, Callaghan and co. But our determined non-sectarianism has brought in members of all parties and groups to the left of that—and many who are members of none (who are disproportionately found among the 'CSE cadres'). The existence of CSE is seen as valuable in providing a basis for co-operation and collective work across party lines; and we remain very cautious about seeing the CSE itself as a 'political organisation' because of the fear that this would push us into defining a series of 'lines' on basic issues such as the contemporary relevance of Leninism. It is especially in the base groups of CSE that this approach works best: in editorial policy it is bound to be more problematic, as the issue of the Italian arrests showed (see the editorial in *C & C* 8 and correspondence in the *Newsletter* recently). But beyond working, in whatever ways we can, for the creation at some point of a mass socialist working-class organisation, we need to define our particular task more clearly.

The collective work of CSE groups is at the centre of this. They have expanded greatly in number and diversity over the last few years. This has

had much to do with the broadening of the focus of CSE work from the labour process (1976 conference) to the state (1977), class struggle (1978) and the transition to socialism (1979); and with the growing number of non-economists who have been drawn into the CSE as a forum where people at least try to break down the barriers between conventional disciplines and between theory and practice. Local and working groups have been the main way, for most active members, of trying to develop more collective and socialist methods of work. When a successful group is established, even if only for a year or two, it can prove a decisive factor in the political, intellectual and social development of those involved.

What we do in CSE groups can potentially become a sort of *interventionist education* which goes beyond simple agitprop or the provision of information to the movement, and develops a *package* of information, education, servicing and political intervention. The urgency of the present political situation, with a blindly reactionary government in power and the threat of a new Cold War, is all too obvious. Struggles against public expenditure cuts, unemployment, racism, sexism, poverty, imperialism—and against the limitations of the left's past failures and weaknesses—are going to need the sort of work that CSE groups can carry out, whether their influence is direct or through political parties, trade unions and community groups.

This means, furthermore, that *empirical* work is as important as ever for the CSE. Why then does it so often seem, both to CSE members and to outsiders, that we are much more concerned with theoretical debates—particularly in terms of the content of *Capital and Class*? To start with, this criticism is not entirely justified. If you look over the contents of recent issues of the journal, *and* the papers of working groups, you'll find a considerable amount of concrete analysis going on: but whereas 'theory' is a common language for many people, most areas of 'concrete work' are not so universal, and the resulting articles can be just as abstruse in their own way. Nevertheless, the problem cannot be evaded so simply. Its origin lies in the political and intellectual background of most CSE members. It would be naive to think that we can create overnight a new style of work and writing, which fuses theoretical and empirical work into a readable amalgam which reports, instructs and arouses at the same time: but we have to keep working at it. It may be that rather than seeking to change *Capital and Class* we should think about an additional publication, something more like the Union of Radical Political Economists' *Dollars and Sense*, or *Labour Research*, which would be more suited to the purpose. We could also develop more systematically our links with other publications, including those of particular political groups: after all, many CSE members write for or help to run other journals and newspapers of the left.

What about the organisation of the CSE itself? As I've indicated, I don't think we face much danger of getting tied up in sectarian disputes, given our low 'political profile' and authority. Relations between the 'centre' and CSE at large often appear to be a problem, at least to those in the centre: but this is mainly because the organising of new CSE activities depends entirely on the developing needs and objectives of CSE groups

and members, not on the will of those who happen to be officers or committee members at any point in time. This is why, for example, the failure of the broad Editorial Board set up in 1976, and then reborn as the Organising Committee, has not mattered too much: *ad hoc* communication with CSE groups has been just about sufficient for developing policy and taking decisions.

There are also technical difficulties, like the computer which loses your address, and the process of acquiring skills in publishing, keeping accounts, etc., which in themselves are not insurmountable. But they do create a more significant problem, namely the steady turnover of comrades involved in central CSE functions through sheer overwork. *CSE Books* is a good example: it has managed to get through the very difficult launching stage because many people have devoted endless time to the task, but a very large proportion have eventually had to drop out. We have to decentralise more tasks, in order to put the burden on collective, locally-based groups rather than on harassed and dispersed individuals. This is being done with Books, the Conference Committee and the Newsletter, with varying degrees of success so far. We increasingly see the importance for the left of forms of work that prefigure socialism; we have to apply this to our own work too.

Since 1970 CSE has not worked any miracles. We began with realistic objectives, in the context of a widely-shared concern for the renewal of revolutionary strategy. We have not found any easy solutions, but I think we have learnt and achieved a good deal, and in the next ten years we can go a lot further.

NOTE

Hugo Radice was secretary of the CSE for most of the period from its formation until 1975, and since then has been variously international secretary, Newsletter editor and conference convenor. This article benefited greatly from the comments of Editorial Committee members, as well as other CSE members, but for better or worse it remains an individual viewpoint.