

1968: That was the year that was

Tariq Ali talks to David Edgar

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David Edgar: Would you say a few things about your family background.

Tariq Ali: My family belonged to the Khattar tribe in the Attock District. It was a landed family. Genealogists traced its descent from the 11th-century Rajputs whose conversion to Islam began a hundred years later, boosted by intermarriage with the offspring of marauding Muslim adventurers from the North. It was completed two centuries before the Mughals arrived. The head of the clan had the right to keep ten thousand men under arms. By the mid 19th century the family had become a laboratory example of a decaying aristocracy quarrelling over property. Absentee landlordism further complicated matters. My parents, for instance, had no idea how much land they owned but it was a hell of a lot since its sale kept them going for a long time.

Tariq Ali at the protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, London, 1968.

Initially both my grandfathers belonged to the faction that supported the British. The big divide in the family began during the Sikh wars, with one side supporting the Sikhs and the other the British. With the first Indian war of independence in 1857 (known in English history books as the Mutiny) there was the same division. I used to think, cynically, that the top echelons of the family did this deliberately: support both sides so that whichever faction of the ruling class wins, the family never loses. That was often the case. Not this time.

The origins of the family divide, I'm pleased to say as a Marxist, lay in a dispute over land between two brothers in the middle years of the 19th century. In September 1846 my forebear, Sardar Karam Khan, the head of the family, was invited by his younger half-brother Fateh Khan to a private meeting without retainers or hangers-on. Both men were on horseback. They met near a stream. Without warning, naughty Fateh drew his sword, and with a single superbly executed blow, severed his older brother's head from his body. The mare on which the slain man was riding galloped back with the decapitated body to the stables on his estate. The feud started there. The widow immediately despatched an appeal for help to General Abbott's encampment about forty miles away (later it became a cantonment town called Abbottabad on whose outskirts Bin Laden would seek and receive refuge). She was seriously worried that her five boys might be massacred by their uncle, but further tragedy was averted. Abbott arrived with a complement of soldiers and gave this wing of the family protection till the boys grew up. Karam's Khan's oldest son, Sardar Muhammed Hyat Khan, became a fanatically loyal servant of the British, fighting on their side in both Afghan wars. Both my parents, who were second cousins, were his great-grandchildren. As a teenager I was always envious of the other, anti-imperialist side. My father advised caution: 'Best not to have too many illusions; the anti-imperialists may not have been as solid as you think.'

Both my mother and my father broke politically with the family, and became communists. My father was very active in the party, which delayed their wedding a bit. My grandfather refused to allow her to marry a communist whose public denunciations of his father-in-law-to-be were hardly a secret. His

condition was that my father join the British Indian Army. They must have imagined that he would never agree, but Operation Barbarossa helped since the CPI instructed all its upper and middle-class members to join the British army and defend the Soviet Union. In the December 1942 wedding photograph my father is wearing a cheeky smile and a British army uniform. He fought, like a number of British communists, at Monte Cassino.

My mother, whose father was the prime minister of the Punjab, impulsively donated most of her wedding jewellery to the CPI. Before all that she had corresponded with Nehru, who was in prison. When Nehru came to tea her father introduced her, saying: 'My young daughter, alas, is a great admirer of yours.' In a later exchange of letters Nehru explained Indian history to her, and told her what a good thing it was that she was being radicalised. Scared that her father might see these letters, she destroyed them. She then went to see Jinnah, who told her she was 'very naughty' for backing his 'big rival', Nehru.

My father's advice to me was to the point: 'Your aunts and uncles are extremely affectionate people, and they love you and one must never be impolite. Like it or not, we are part of this family, but please never underestimate the levels of stupidity. When I see how stupid all your mother's five brothers are I feel there must have been some creative design somewhere.'

And your house was full of trade unionists and peasant leaders but also writers?

Our house was often filled with peasant leaders, trade-union leaders, radical poets, essayists, short-story writers, and occasionally, not encouraged too much, members of the family, or old family friends. In Pakistan, the Communist Party was banned, and two of its leaders, Muslim intellectuals from India who'd been sent to fertilise the barren land which was now Pakistan, were trying to create a party. One of them was a brilliant literary critic, Sajjad Zaheer, who was the party secretary. When the party was banned, they went underground, and Zaheer was put up in our house, pretending to be a professor of literature from Aligarh University. One night we were eating supper and there was a knock on the door. In walked one of my grandfather's oldest and dearest friends, but who happened also to be inspector-general of the country's police force. In he came, sat down and ate with us. There was a slight nervousness, but the professor/underground CP leader carried it off brilliantly. He knew how to deal with these people, discuss literature and Quranic interpretation, but after supper he beat a retreat: 'With your leave, sir, I'm tired, I'll just retire to bed.' The inspector-general of police turned to my parents, and said: 'I wish all your friends were like that! Where did you find such a cultured guy?' A week later, when he was looking at pics of the disappeared CP leaders, he saw that the person he'd met at dinner was actually on the most-wanted list! So, it was a contradictory existence, though I never had any doubts which side I was on.

The other side was more fun; they laughed and they joked, but one learned a great deal from trade-union and railway workers' leaders, who treated me as an adult from quite a young age. I'd say, 'What's going on?' and they'd explain: 'This is what's going on ...'

And when you started organising demonstrations and so on, how did your parents respond?

My father was nervous when I started to be politically active. The country was under military rule and politics and marches were forbidden. I was 16, or 16 and a half, and still at school when I read in the papers that a black American, Jimmy Wilson, had been sentenced to death for stealing a dollar. I can still recall that moment of deep shock. We couldn't believe it. Even if he'd stolen a million, executing him was a bit much. So I got a few schoolfriends together, and said to them: 'We can't not do anything.' I think there were about twenty of us in school uniform marching to the American Consulate on Empress Road, and we were joined en route by lots of street urchins, who thought it was a good cause after we promised Cokes and kebabs later. Because Jimmy Wilson was a

Western name, they thought they had to chant 'Death to ...', so we had to say: 'No, no - you can't chant "Death to Jimmy Wilson" - that's what we're protesting!' When we explained it to them, they reversed the chant to 'Long live Jimmy Wilson!' So we arrived at the consulate and saw the consul-general. I still remember his name, Dr Spengler, a hard-faced, wrinkled and bespectacled Protestant of German origin, not a trace of sympathy on his face. He didn't even reply. I said: 'We've got a letter here because you're going to execute a black American for stealing a dollar and then you say you're democrats ... it's unacceptable behaviour.' His response was to ask for our names and when we'd given them he told us he'd be writing to our principal the next morning 'to tell him who you are, why you did this and asking him to take disciplinary action'. This was my first direct contact with American democracy. We just left. 'God!' we said. 'The guy didn't even reply to us! Nothing at all, just cold as ice.'

That was the first demonstration. The second came in 1961, when I was at university. Again, we read in the newspapers that morning that Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese leader, had been killed. And we assumed - and were proved right - that this had been done by the Americans; and we now know that, for many hours, Lumumba's dead body was in the boot of a car being driven about the place by the head of CIA station as he wondered where to dump it. So here I called a meeting. I was a student union official, but fearing opposition I did so without consulting anyone; two hundred people gathered in the hall. This is Lahore in 1961. The mood was quite internationalist, and I said: 'This is what's happened - we cannot let this be ... Lumumba's murder must not go without a response, let's do it now, before anyone can stop us.' So two hundred of us marched out onto the streets - totally against the laws - and went to the American Consulate and Government House, chanting slogans in favour of Lumumba.

Nothing happened - no police, nothing. Our demo was photographed, so we got some coverage; and on the way back to the college, emboldened by what we'd achieved, we started chanting: 'Down with the dictatorship! We want democracy!' And that angered the government more than the death of Lumumba, whom they didn't care about one way or the other. And then the principal was told: 'You've got to control these boys.' He was a very, very good and enlightened principal, who said to us: 'You can do anything you want on the university grounds, but on the streets I can't defend you. Here you can study whatever you want: it is a time to read, to learn.' We said: 'Yeah, but we can't just read.' My father was told that it was all getting out of hand, so that year I was banned from speaking at any political meeting or appearing at a demonstration. To circumvent the ban my friends would organise harmless debates with titles such as 'we prefer lassi to Coca-Cola.' The speeches, too, were allegorical. Laughter proved a good weapon.

A demonstration I forgot to mention had taken place in Lahore when I was approaching 13: the huge anti-Suez demonstration in 1956, when the targets were British and French imperialism, and Israel of course - and it was amazing. The university students came to our school to have it closed so we could join the demo, and the principal, Brother Henderson, closed it for the day. Because there was no martial law, no military dictatorship then, about 150,000 people marched through the streets of Lahore. Our government supported the British, which provoked a wave of anger against them. 'Does independence mean nothing? We're still behaving like a colony.'

My mother was completely supportive of my activities. My father less so: 'You're not studying at all. You read what you like, which is fine, but you've got to get through the exams, this is a crucial stage, and then we'll see what needs to be done.' So he advised caution. 'There are some things one has to do,' I answered. 'You know that better than most.' 'Yeah,' he replied, 'but I also got firsts.' I said: 'Well, that doesn't matter so much to me.' 'Well, it does to us,' he said. So, it was the usual father-son dynamic, with my mother caught in between, half agreeing with me, half with my father. One day they told me they had decided to send me abroad. My mother's brother, a senior figure in military intelligence, came to the house with a big file when he knew I was out. 'This is the file the

boy's accumulated so far,' he told my father, 'and it's going to rise and rise, so I suggest that it's time to get him out of the country because he will be locked up soon, and there's nothing I can do.' They didn't tell me that till much, much later, knowing that I would have refused to leave. Instead it was: 'Off you go, apply to Oxford, apply to Cambridge.' I applied to Oxford, and got a place. My girlfriend was at Camberwell Art College – her father had become a diplomat in London – so that was undoubtedly an inducement. But by and large, I really didn't want to go, but they said: 'You have to go.' So I said: 'Why are you so insistent? You want to waste all this stupid money sending me there? I'm quite happy here.' My mother, very unusually, insisted: 'No, no, you've got to go.' So that's how I got to Oxford.

Did you find Oxford very stultifying?

I loved it. I'll tell you why – because in Pakistan there was a shortage of books to read. There was a presidential ordinance which had banned all left-wing literature from entering the country, so of course, while one got a frisson reading Marx in clandestine study circles, we were limited to the literature available in the university libraries. When I got to Oxford, the first thing was just to read, non-stop, books that were never available in Pakistan: D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Isaac Deutscher's Trotsky trilogy, Trotsky himself, other Bolshevik leaders, many others. So for me Oxford was very liberating and on many fronts.

When I came to Britain, it was obvious that the United States had taken over the function of the old British Empire, and that after the Suez debacle Britain was tied to Washington with an umbilical cord made of piano wire. Very soon after I came, there was a general election. Harold Wilson had replaced Hugh Gaitskell as leader of the Labour Party and was soon to become prime minister. I canvassed for Labour in 1964. At *Private Eye*, where I used to spend a lot of time, Richard Ingrams said: 'Why don't you compile "The Thoughts of Chairman Harold"? Just dig out the best quotes from him, and Ralph Steadman will illustrate them.' So my first book was compiling all those wonderful anti-imperialist quotes from Wilson – I mean, quote after quote after quote. I still treasure that book. Wilson didn't send troops to Vietnam, as he was under heavy pressure to do – we should never forget that. But he supported the American line ideologically, if half-heartedly, and the British state did help the US on some levels. Right-wing Labour was solidly for the Vietnam War. More than a hundred Labour MPs, however, were on our side.

I went to hear Wilson speak at Putney, and at that time I wasn't very knowledgeable about the English Revolution. Wilson started off with: 'And we are standing on a historical platform today, because on this very heath took place the great debates that made this country a democracy.' There were two, three thousand people at that rally, and I think that was the first time I'd heard a political leader giving the audience a history lesson.

In 1967 I went to North Vietnam for the Russell/Sartre war crimes tribunal. That experience seared me for life. Later I joined a team sent by Bertrand Russell to attend Régis Debray's trial in Camiri as part of an effort to save his life. All this left a mark. But it was at the Berlin congress organised in January 1968 by the SDS, the left-wing German students, that I began to feel the need to join some organisation. Rudi Dutschke was there, the Wolf brothers with Ulrike Meinhof skulking in the background and three black GIs marching to the platform to chant: 'I ain't gonna go to Vietnam, cos Vietnam is where I am. Hell no! I ain't gonna go.'

I felt, there was nothing like the SDS in Britain, I had left the Labour Party over Vietnam and restrictions on immigration, and I had to join something. The person I happened to be sitting next to on the platform in Berlin was Ernest Mandel, who afterwards said: 'There's a small group of comrades in Britain who you'd be interested in – they're very internationalist and Vietnam is our major priority.' I met some of these comrades, and I said: 'Not that I'm bothered, because I like what

you write, and particularly what he writes, but how many members do you have?' And they looked at each other, a look which said: 'Should we tell him the truth?' And they said: 'We've got about forty in Nottingham and thirty in London.' So I said: 'Fine!' But that's what it was like - that's how these things happened. So I joined the International Marxist Group.

The other Trotskyist groups in Britain just amazed me, because they never accepted there was a socialist revolution in China, or Vietnam, or Cuba, or anywhere. It was just 1917, which for someone coming from Asia was a huge shock, and revealed a narrow-minded Eurocentric provincialism. After one of their trips abroad in 1962 or 1963, my parents had brought back a journal bought at Collets in Central London, called the *New Left Review*. That issue had a long text on the debates going on inside the Italian Communist Party - precisely on Stalinism, anti-Stalinism, non-Stalinism - which I read, and a whole group of us passed it round in Lahore; and that's how it began. I was desperate to read more. And once I'd read Deutscher, Trotsky's *My Life* and particularly *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany*, I thought the IMG was the organisation I wanted to join, because I was not an uncritical supporter of the Soviet Union. It did mark a break with my parents, who were no doubt very embarrassed, because they remained pro-Soviet till they died. When Jeremy Corbyn met them at a peace conference in Denmark in the early 1990s he asked what they thought of me. My father said, 'We're proud of him,' which pleased me greatly. He had never said anything like that to me ...

In 1968, you started the 'Black Dwarf' - a newspaper that straddled the revolutionary Marxist left and the much more culturally oriented hippy left ...

The idea for the *Black Dwarf* came from Clive Goodwin, who was my literary agent and a dear friend. At one meeting that he called at his house, he said: 'Guys, what about launching a paper?' We decided we would and Christopher Logue was deputed to go to what's now the British Library to look into possible names. I'd said: 'I'm totally opposed to traditional left names - "Workers' this", or "Socialist that". The people who are coming into politics are not going to be attracted by that. We've got to have a different style, too.' So, Christopher went to the British Library, and studied radical newspapers from the 19th century, and came back the following week, very excited, with a list. And he said: 'But my favourite one is the *Black Dwarf*. Do you know why it's called the *Black Dwarf*?' 'No.' He went on: 'It was a paper created by Thomas Wooler, a very radical journalist, for the miners really: miners were stunted after generations of working in these mines, and when they came out of the mines in the evening their faces were covered with soot. So Tom Wooler decided to call the paper the *Black Dwarf*.' We had a vote, and everyone was in favour, which was rare - I think even David Mercer, who was the most grumpy attendant at these meetings.

So that's how it happened, and we raised money for a broadsheet, the first broadsheet on Mayday 1968, and people poured in with offers of help. When I think back on it, it was quite unusual: first, you had the poets, you had David Mercer, who really did help a great deal; behind the scenes, there were people working for the BBC who couldn't be public, but we can name them now - Ken Trodd, Ken Loach, Tony Garnett, John McGrath. You know, from the cultural milieu. There was Clive, Fred Halliday, later Sheila Rowbotham got involved, and Roger Smith, script editor at the BBC. The French May erupted as we were about to launch the first issue, which had come out looking slightly miserabilist and unimaginative. It was generally felt that the cover was awful. We voted to pulp it and D.A.N. Jones, later of the *LRB*, walked out. We'd lost the editor. I was asked to take over and with designer Robin Fior looking over my shoulder I wrote: we shall fight, we will win: Paris, London, Rome, Berlin. The vote was unanimous. We were for Utopia. To raise money, we would have to get hold of people who by our standards were very wealthy: David Hockney, Ron Kitaj, Feliks Topolski, and other painters, who said: 'Well ... we're a bit short of funds, but here, have a painting.' And if we'd kept those paintings, we could now have launched six magazines; but auctions were held, and the money was put into the *Black Dwarf* - and lots of people liked the flavour of it.

My favourite financier, once the paper was launched and coming out semi-regularly, was a guy who used to come into the office once a week – very tall, thick blond hair reaching his shoulders, wearing dusty blue overalls. He used to pull out a sheaf of fivers, which in those days were gold dust, and leave them for us. I can't remember the exact sums, but they were huge: a hundred quid, fifty quid, two hundred quid if we were lucky, sometimes more than that. After this had been going on for some weeks, colleagues said: 'Tariq, you've got to ask him' – because he would come and put it on my desk, shake hands, turn his back on us and go away. One day I said: 'Look, everyone here's curious – I mean, if you don't want to say, you don't have to, but ... why are you doing this?' It emerged that he was a stallholder on the Portobello Road, doing quite well, which is why it was cash and not cheques. And he said: 'Why am I doing this?' There was a pause. 'I'm doing it because capitalism is really non-groovy, man.' How could one not agree with what was then very true: 'Well, there's no doubt about that. And ... thank you.' And he did keep on coming. And he never gave his name.

The other one was an armed-struggle potter, a woman called Fiona Armour-Brown, who lived in Wales. She was slightly over the top. She believed we should be setting up small terrorist groups – that wasn't the word used, but that's effectively what it was – in Wales and parts of Northern England, to challenge Labour. So we laughed her out of that one. But, again, she would send a cheque for a hundred quid, occasionally more – I think she'd inherited family money, too. Once when she came to the office I asked her why she was giving us this money. She said: 'Politics – it's the best paper around – but there's also a personal thing involved.'

'What's that?' She said: 'Once, I was standing by a cliff-edge on the French Riviera – I was very unhappy, don't ask why – when a guy rolled up on a motorbike, with a leather jacket, stopped, looked sternly at me and said: 'You're not thinking of committing suicide, are you?' And I was so stunned I said: 'Well, that is what I was about to do.' He said, 'Don't be silly! Come on, get on the back of my motorbike – I don't have a spare helmet – and I'll take you to the nearest town, and we'll sit down and get rid of this nonsense in your head.' That was Christopher Logue. 'So,' she said, 'I owe Christopher my life, and when I saw that he was also one of the founding editors of your magazine ...' I checked with Christopher, who said: 'Thank God I did it.'

We now look back at 1968 as being a high point, but how did it feel, in terms of what you thought was going to happen, and what you thought you were involved in doing? I'm thinking particularly of the Vietnam campaign.

I never, ever thought the Vietnam demonstrations would lead to anything like a revolution – I had no feeling at all that was going to happen. We may have pioneered the big Vietnam demonstrations, for the whole of Europe – the Germans took tips from us and the French as well – but nothing happened in Britain in 1968-69 to equal the general strike in France, the largest ever in the history of capitalism, or Socialism with a Human Face, the movement started by reform communists in Czechoslovakia; or the workers in Italy demanding workers' control. In Britain in 1968-69, there was a lot of politics, there was a lot of intermingling of politics and culture – the Stones, mainly, but later the Beatles and many other singers and bands. That link between politics and culture was the height of our achievement – and, of course, trying to help the Vietnamese. The workers' strikes didn't come till the 1970s, with the big miners' strikes.

That was the first time one felt that something might happen. It wasn't the miners' strike itself, but the solidarity with it from other trade unions that freaked the rulers out – the T&G blocking roads and mounting mass pickets. A friend of mine, Robin Blackburn, was getting married and there was a small dinner party after the ceremonies. The miners' strike was the main topic of conversation when a slightly out-of-breath, young upper-class woman called Mary Furness swept in. 'Sorry for being late,' she said as she inspected us in turn, looking quizzically at Perry Anderson and at the *Black Dwarf* people telling Robin off for having sold out by getting married.

'If you knew where I was yesterday, you'd understand why I'm looking a bit traumatised at being in your company,' she said.

'Tell us, Mary.' And she did: 'I was at a dinner party given by Colin Tennant in their big country house. It didn't surprise me that it was grand, but it was a bit too grand, with a butler announcing who was entering and there, sitting in the room, were the Tennants, a few other guests and Harold Macmillan. I whispered to my host: "Who are we waiting for?"

"The queen and Prince Philip."

'I swallowed. Then they arrived and we sat down to dinner. The whole evening was spent - you're not going to believe this, but you'll all be quite flattered - discussing the miners' strike. Philip was abusive, wanting Scargill's head to roll. But it was the queen who surprised me: "I think things have got really out of control, and this is the end," she said. "These workers are getting too much power, they're running the country - they're holding the country to ransom." All the tabloid clichés were being repeated. There was a general sense of panic.' The guests at the Blackburn wedding were very amused, we knew the reality was slightly different - but never mind. And yes, it was quite pleasing. Someone interrupted (I think it was Perry): 'Just like Victoria. Petrified by 1848.'

Mary continued: 'To try and stop this short - though it took him some time - Macmillan spoke directly to the queen, and said: "Ma'am, this is England we're talking about, and here the pendulum does swing, but it never swings the whole way - and while you're seeing the pendulum swing to the left, I can already detect a slight movement to the right - so don't panic, everything's going to be all right.'"

The pendulum did swing the whole way outside the Banqueting Hall in 1649. But never since and six years later, we had Thatcher.

Why do you think the hopes of the 1965-75 period were dashed?

I've always felt that, in Britain, it was the hegemony of Labour in the working-class movement and its total monopoly of working-class representation in Parliament that actually prevented it from broadening until the miners' strike - and even here, the big strike happened when there was a Conservative government. Edward Heath walks into the meeting with the miners, and Lawrence Daly, the national secretary of the union, is sitting in a chair with his feet up on the conference table. As Heath comes in, the other miners' leaders stand up. Daly keeps sitting, looks at Heath and greets him: 'Hello, sailor!'

Politically Daly was exceptional, because he was an autodidact, part of the New Left, and had read Edward Thompson, Deutsch etc. He was with me in North Vietnam. He was carrying a bottle of the finest malt for Ho Chi Minh, but somehow we drained it in Phnom Penh. Scargill had a similar make-up. It was a very confident working class, and it was not till it had been destroyed, had its nose rubbed in the dust at Orgreave and in various other confrontations, that Thatcher could impose what they called the reforms - and what I called the regressions - that have dominated neoliberal Britain ever since.

But internationally ...

If we look at the 1960s as a decade that began in 1965 and ended in 1975, the only victory was Pakistan, where a three-month uprising, led by students, joined by workers, and in some parts of the country peasants, and virtually all the professions, civil servants, lawyers - you name it, including, I have to say, prostitutes. They came out onto the streets and marched for democracy, socialism and an end to dictatorship. A popular slogan was 'Capitalists and Landlords! Stand Back. Pakistan

belongs to us.' This started on 7 November 1968 and ended in March 1969. The dictatorship was toppled, and for the first time a free election was permitted.

That was one victory. Another that came close was Portugal – probably the most advanced of the European rebellions. Portugal was the smallest colonial power, yet the most rabid and obstinate in clinging to its colonies. But in the 1960s and early 1970s, Portuguese soldiers and officers, as well as the guerrillas, were listening avidly to their radios and watching the news coming in from Vietnam as the National Liberation Front won in Khe Sanh and in January 1968 the Viet Cong occupied the US Embassy. That had a big, big impact in radicalising the soldiers, who were now reading Mao and Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh, just to see how the enemy thinks, and got infected themselves. And of course the guerrillas were being supported by the global left and being given money by the Chinese, the Russians etc.

The defeats in Africa had radicalised the middle layers of Portuguese society as well as regular soldiers, who were summoned back home – they weren't left in the colonies. Strikes started happening and demonstrations demanding an end to the country's senile and Bonapartist dictatorship. Without any violence, the army had cracked up, and we felt the situation was very close to a revolutionary seizure of power. Mário Soares, backed by the German Social Democratic Party, used to give the most sensational speeches – you know, like Desmoulins or Danton. This completely colourless bureaucrat, whom we'd never thought capable, would address a crowd of 150,000 in Lisbon, mainly workers and peasants and Students for the Portuguese Revolution – they all called it a 'revolution'. Soares would ask the workers: 'Do we want socialism?' 'Yes!' 'Do we want land reforms?' 'Yes!' 'Do we want state ownership of factories and industry?' 'Yes, yes, yes!' 'And do we want democracy?' 'Yes!'

But the far left ignored the question of democratic accountability when it called for a dictatorship of the proletariat. In other words, he seemed to be telling the country that one dictatorship was going to be replaced by another. People weren't stupid; lots of Portuguese workers had travelled to France, they knew what was happening in the world, and they knew what Eastern Europe was like. They didn't want a situation where the media spoke in one voice – they had that and wanted something different. Soares understood this, and with very well-crafted and well-delivered speeches, he won. So the very strong revolutionary impulse was defeated thanks to a sort of political weakness. Of course, lots of people then realised what had happened but it was too late.

And in America, you've got the Civil Rights movement overthrowing an apartheid state in the South; you've got the waging of the Vietnam War made impossible; you've got Lyndon Johnson deciding he can't stand again.

The growth of the anti-war movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s has no equivalent in any other imperialist country. It was the highpoint of dissent in US history that helped to end the war. The entire country, right and left, liberal and reactionary, was discussing the Vietnam War. The Tet Offensive in January 1968, a concerted attack by the Vietnamese liberation armies on a hundred towns, including Saigon and most provincial capitals, was dramatic and effective. The Americans should have sued for peace immediately. Instead, they carried on the war for another seven years using chemical weapons to kill and disfigure people and Agent Orange to destroy the ecology: barbarisms that were seen on the television news most evenings. Corpses were coming home every day, funerals were held all over the States and the Vietnamese were winning – the decisive fact was that they couldn't defeat them. Every year General Westmoreland would give a Christmas broadcast: 'The boys will be home next year.' Well, the boys didn't appear to be coming home, but cripples and people who were traumatised by what they'd seen came home, and that created an anti-war movement without precedent in a big imperial state. One of the most astonishing things was the march outside the Pentagon in, I think, 1971, mainly organised by GIs and veterans against the war,

where you had between seventy and a hundred thousand ex-GIs, in uniform, with all their medals, on crutches, in wheelchairs, marching outside the Pentagon and chanting: 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is going to win!' That hurt the Pentagon much more than al-Qaida's bombs on 9/11.

Why didn't that lead to a viable left alternative in both Anglo-Saxon countries?

That has to do, in Britain at least, with the political structure of the labour movement and a political party created by the trade unions, effectively to act as their parliamentary voice. You'd need something very big to break that, something on the scale of, say, a Labour prime minister ordering troops to open fire on strikers – something horrific like that. And I hate to say this, but the British labour movement, or at any rate most of it, has always been part and parcel of the empire – it never opposed British imperialism and the colonies. In fact, they were quite superior – the Fabians especially were all imperialists – thinking of themselves as taking civilisation to them. So there was never a viable anti-imperialist tradition, except for small affiliated groups like the Independent Labour Party, or a small trade union linked to the Communist Party, or the tiny Communist Party itself. The Communist Party never became a huge force in British politics as it did in France and Italy as a result of the Resistance during the Second World War.

Do you think the left, the far left, that you were involved with could have acted differently?

I used to think that if the entire far left had formed a party ... but what would they have done? First, they'd have sort of battered each other to death, or to political death; and second, the electoral structure of Britain – the first-past-the-post system – makes it virtually impossible to build a third party, as we've seen with the rise and fall and rise and fall of the Liberals; or the Greens winning a million votes and getting a single member of Parliament or, a more dramatic example, the now happily dying Ukip getting millions of votes and just one MP. That makes it very difficult to gain electoral representation. The monopoly hold that Labour had on working-class representation was broken to a certain extent by the Tories, and then by other small things – or just led to abstentions in the later Blair years. But it's never been completely broken, and of course now it's back with a vengeance, which I don't mind too much because of Corbyn. A third party proved impossible in the US as well. There geography matters a lot and I've advised the left to target cities and states first. The Democratic Socialists of America have thirty thousand members today. A small start?

In the 1980s and 1990s, when, clearly, the left was on the back foot nationally and internationally – nationally with Thatcherism, and internationally with the fall of communism – you could argue that, despite all that, the left was winning things, but they were cultural things: gay rights, gains for women, gains for black people, gains in a general liberalisation of society. Do you think that the left took its eye off the important economic transformation?

What happened to the left in the 1990s – here and in the States and elsewhere in Europe – was that the far left seriously underestimated the impact of the collapse of communism on millions of people globally, who didn't particularly like the Soviet Union but were glad it existed. Its very presence was a bulwark vis à vis the United States. In South America, large parts of Asia, Africa, even in Europe, more intelligent people realised that a total collapse of this system was a defeat of huge proportions for the left, regardless of whether you liked or disliked the Soviet Union. Some on the far left thought 'Ah ... now it's our turn!', forgetting that, for all their lives, they had been little more than footnotes to the giant communist movement without which they wouldn't have come into existence. And, as a result, some lost their grip on politics, and became more and more conservative, in terms of how they acted, what they did, because they just couldn't grasp what had happened.

People on the broad left did say, 'It's a defeat; we've lost,' but they turned to identity politics – which are also, let it be remembered, the offspring of the 1960s and 1970s. I mean, why was the women's

movement called the women's liberation movement, clearly linked to the struggles in the Third World against the empire? The gay liberation movement, the black liberation movement, the Black Panthers – all these grew up in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s, and they have left a strong mark. Not that the problems are over, as we know; the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, the incarceration rates of African-Americans – horrendous. So it's not that we won everything, even on certain questions, especially racism.

The traditional thing the Labour movement is supposed to do is to defend the poor and working class but that stopped and there was nowhere else to go?

What is often overlooked is that it wasn't just official communism that collapsed in 1991: traditional social democracy fell with it. The whole function of social democracy, for most of the 20th century, was to have an alternative within capitalism that fought for some of the reforms as a bulwark against the rising tide of revolution, communism, whatever you want to call it. And once the old enemy had gone, capital and its leaders felt no particular reason to carry on following that path. Instead, they embarked on turbo-charged capitalism, not caring a damn who was trodden underfoot. And the social democracies played a huge part in it. The bulk of the privatisations in France were carried out by a socialist government: Mitterrand and Jospin. Blair, Mandelson, Brown were staunch advocates of neoliberalism, quite relaxed with people making loads of money. The last social democratic government in Britain which narrowed the gap between rich and poor, if one's being very cold-blooded about it, was the Wilson government. The post-fall-of-communism social democratic parties were not all that different from the centre-right parties; and so what developed, in large parts of Europe and elsewhere in the world too – India is one example – is what I've described as an extreme centre. It didn't matter which party you belonged to, centre-left or centre-right; basically, you were for the same neoliberal economic policies; by and large you supported America's wars all over the world; you were staunch supporters of Nato. And that created a huge vacuum, which led to two things: one, to a growing number of abstentions – lots of people, traditional supporters of social democracy, stopped voting altogether. Apart from the most recent election in Britain, the figures are quite shocking. A bulk of people between the ages of 18 and 30 didn't vote at all; it was the same in France and in other countries. And the creation of this vacuum, coupled with the Wall Street crash, opened up gaps, which were more often filled, in France and now Germany, by the rise of large right-wing groups. In the US, we had two clear alternatives. The opinion polls were showing that Bernie Sanders would have defeated Trump, but Clinton went with traditional extreme centre-type politics, and handed the presidency to a weird, maverick, white supremacist billionaire, who more or less took over the Republican Party for his own purposes, and came to power on a platform which promised quite a few changes, none of which have happened. So that is the situation we're still in.

Why was the left not taking advantage of the crash?

The social-democratic parties – let's start with them – had moved so far to the right, especially New Labour, because that is the way they thought things were going to go. So, when the crash came, all they could do was spend more and more taxpayers' money to keep the banks going in order to save capitalism. Right and left, there was no difference between them. One of the first things Blair and Brown did was to be photographed with Thatcher, inviting her back to 10 Downing Street, to show continuity. Cameron in turn made no secret of the fact that he was a great admirer of Blair. We had this continuity in the creation of an extreme centre. And the result was that opportunist, right-wing, semi-fascist, hard-right – whatever you want to call them – currents stole a lot of their clothes. Germany was the first country to witness the emergence of a party of the left, actually called Die Linke, 'The Left', which united the former East German ruling party with strands of West German social democracy. The biggest break, if you like, was in Germany, where Oskar Lafontaine had a left-Keynesian programme; he opposed the war Germany had waged in Yugoslavia, saying that the German state had yet to acknowledge its responsibility for the break-up of Yugoslavia. The very fact

that he split openly and publicly was seen by many people on the left as a positive thing. It united the East German and the West German left, which is not doing too badly. The extreme centre suffered huge blows in Italy and France. In the latter the elite succeeded in manoeuvring Macron into position and he has now embarked on a Thatcherite operation. In Italy there is no government as we speak.

How do you account for the surprise of 8 June last year?

Two reasons. The first is that the campaign for Scottish independence, even though it was lost, the way it was actually fought – by both sides, but with the young mainly on the side of independence – was a tonic. I was in Scotland a great deal during that time, speaking at meetings, and it was a joy – something I hadn't witnessed before on these islands. Everyone in Scotland was talking or thinking politics – everyone, on both sides. How could anyone forget the amazing scene when the Labour MPs, dragooned into campaigning against independence, stepped off the train at Glasgow and a solitary bagpiper stole the show. 'Here come the traitors!' he announced. 'Here come the traitors from London, the members of the House of Commons, who back the Union.' Most of them subsequently lost their seats.

The other reason was that the voting age had been reduced to 16, so all the schools were involved. I was asked some of the most intelligent questions by sixth-formers, studying both sides of the debate. The young almost pulled it off. It was watched on the social networks by many young people in England. They began to wonder why this should be restricted to Scotland. There was a feeling: 'Look at the lucky Scots – they're at least trying to change their system, whereas here we're completely paralysed.' And then, soon after the Labour Party lost the election and Ed Miliband resigned there was a fight for the succession, with most of the candidates offering more of the same. The Labour left under New Labour is often allowed a token candidate. This time the token won.

Well, it was Corbyn's turn, wasn't it?

He reluctantly agreed to be the standard-bearer this time. And then what happened was unbelievable. All these candidates were given equal time on television and radio; and Corbyn says what he believes in, which is traditional left, and sometimes not so left, social-democratic values. He told me that after one of the big rallies, more and more people kept coming up to him, the young especially, because they heard him say things on television that no one else said and decided they were going to listen to him. It was a spontaneous uprising – a political insurrection. The young swelled the meetings. Corbyn would say: 'We're going to make higher education free again.' And when he said that what surprised him was the number of young people who came up and said: 'Was higher education once free? We had no idea.' He got a feeling that memory was being wiped out under the neoliberal dispensation. That's why he spent a lot of time saying: 'This is what used to happen, and we are going to make sure it will happen again; the railways were once state-owned, and they were much better ...' So he ran this campaign for taking back the railways and the public utilities, education – ideas which for us were so banal in the 1960s. I mean, we just took all that for granted. But it had been lost, because all these things had been lost. And here was a sober-looking leader, not at all wild, as presented in the media, the first leader of the Labour Party who was anti-imperialist in a serious way, not supporting the wars, defending his membership of Stop the War etc. People couldn't believe their luck; and it grew, and suddenly the media, and the people who live in the London media bubble in particular, were horrified – the look of sheer horror on their faces as they thought Corbyn might win. It was a delight to watch.

The bulk of the Parliamentary Labour Party was against him. In order to try to stop him standing for the leadership the second time, he had to undergo what no elected Labour leader had ever undergone. And when the call went out, these kids joined the Labour Party to vote for Corbyn. Half a

million people joined, making it the largest political party in Europe. And still the Brown and Blair factions in the party couldn't understand that young people wanted these changes. So he was called to a Parliamentary Labour Party meeting, where they passed a vote of no confidence, and we were hoping against hope that he wasn't going to accept that. And he didn't. He said: 'You may have no confidence in me; the Labour Party which we're building does have confidence, and I'm going to fight for it again.' So both his politics and his determination surprised people. His resilience at that moment was remarkable. The aim was to demoralise him into resigning. His nerve held.

You were involved in a youth movement whose slogan was: 'Don't trust anybody over thirty.' What lessons could you draw from the 1960s experience? Could you suggest a way forward now that might be more secure?

Well, the 1960s moment had to do with an extra-parliamentary challenge to the established order. I mean, we were in little groups, but basically it was a mass movement. And we felt that if any change was to come, it would come on the streets, it would come via a huge wave of strikes – but that didn't happen. In countries where it did happen – in France and in Italy – there was no political organisation large enough at the decisive moment to say: 'Now we go for it; we may lose and be wiped out, but we'll go for it' – a Paris Commune moment, a 1917 moment. That moment came in Portugal and was lost. In Britain, in the absence of anything striking on the left, these young folk went into one of the established political parties, and that's what could have made the difference.

Ali on the march against the Vietnam War, London, 17 March 1968.

The election result that brought Labour within a whisker of being the largest party in Parliament gave people a lot of hope. More people joined after the result was announced so the floodtide keeps on rising. They built Momentum, which campaigns independently, inside and outside the Labour Party. So the structures are very different, and the times are very different. Now, if you ask me, could this new Labour Party, under a Corbyn leadership, win the next election? I would say: 'Yeah, if it's not too far away. I think it could win.' And in an awful way, I can't help thinking that if the Grenfell fire had happened the week before the election, it would probably have resulted in a Labour victory because that wretched, horrible fire symbolised all that was wrong with neoliberal Britain. So, could these young people propel Corbyn into power? The answer is yes. The problem is that Corbyn leads a Labour Party the bulk of whose membership wants a return to social democracy but whose parliamentary representatives are still moulded by the neoliberal priorities and conservatism of the Blair/Brown era. Some have tried to use identity politics as a mask to cover their reactionary politics, but this isn't working too well either. Sadiq Khan, Chuka Umunna and more than a few women would be just as happy with a Cameron-style Tory outfit. In fact they and their colleagues voted for Tory budgets and immigration laws. When New Labour took the party over, they changed the structures, they gave more power to the regional heads, they reduced the powers of Constituency Labour Parties, parachuted Blair and Brown's staff into safe working-class constituencies without a murmur of dissent from the liberal media. They had basically everything under control – and changing that is not proving easy.

My worry is ... let's say Corbyn wins. The victory will be a tonic, and for a time they'll find it difficult to go against him; but on all big issues – wars, renationalisations or regulation of capital – I think he's going to be in trouble; and my own feeling is that the Labour right is going to put forward a totally uncritical pro-Remain view to try and tie him down, so that, basically, the referendum will be ignored. That is what they're planning: tie his hands if we can't remove him. That is the way they'll attack, and the only hope is that, over the next year at least, more and more local Labour Parties will reflect the membership, and not the party bureaucracy.

Do you feel that there might be a possibility in Britain – and, who knows, in America – of what you

described as a left-Keynesian party coming to power that would actually bring about a lot of what we want under the current circumstances?

The Labour manifesto promises to take the utilities back into public ownership, which is something more or less prohibited by EU regulations. Uncritical Remainers refuse to accept that: for them, anything created and set up by the state, or taken over by the state, that competes with private capital is regarded as at best semi-legal. There's a debate on these things, obviously, because other countries, too, are involved in some of these discussions. But that would be the first block, which won't be a block if Labour isn't in the EU. So, curiously, being out of the EU under a left government could be beneficial. I think some of these things will be pushed through. There will be opposition from within, but I'm sort of moderately optimistic that can be dealt with by doing what Corbyn has been very good at already - actually organising campaigns, and making politics into a social movement, as far as Labour is concerned. So a defence of taking the utilities back, provided you have social movements around them, could do the trick, and that would also put pressure on Labour's right-wing parliamentarians, who will probably vote against it or abstain, or whatever. Also there is what we used to call in the 1960s and 1970s the dialectic of partial conquests, i.e. should we cling to the gains we've already achieved, or put them at risk by trying to get more? It's the question that faced social-democratic and communist parties from the postwar period to 1991, and which confronts many parties today, including the Corbynista Labour Party: How far to go? These are matters of political tactics and strategy, but the problem remains. Till now, Corbyn has been good at dealing with it and fighting for what he believes in inside and outside the Labour Party - but it's the outside of the party that has finally pulled it off.

Do you think that what's now happened could have happened earlier?

I don't believe that at all. I remember more than a decade ago travelling on a train going to Belgium, and a guy sitting opposite me was staring at me, and then when I looked back at him he covered his face. And when we got off the train, he said: 'You don't recognise me, Tariq, which is just as well for me.' I asked why. 'I used to be a Trotskyist in Belgium, and in the same international organisation as yours.'

'What are you now?'

'I'm minister for health in the current government.' I said: 'Well, that's at least something, because you could be minister for finance or defence, which would have meant that you were right to hide your face. But are you doing anything decent?'

'Well, that's for you to judge.'

In virtually every European government you have someone or other from the far left. José Manuel Barroso, the chief honcho of the EU for ten years, was a Maoist in Portugal, best known for organising a raid on a public university to steal furniture to replenish Maoist party headquarters in Lisbon. Currently he's a non-executive chairman at Goldman Sachs. Daniel Cohn-Bendit is advising Macron at the Elysée even as we speak. It's not the case that they didn't try: they failed completely, because by that time they'd become total cynics. What is quite entertaining to me is that some of the most dogmatic people on the far left, or on its fringes, are now equally dogmatic as government ministers, but on the other side. Some of the people who were around Lula in Brazil were ex-Trotskyists from the Lambertiste faction which entered the French Socialist Party and gave us Jospin, who advised total capitulation to neoliberalism in his first term. As prime minister Jospin ran into Alain Krivine from a rival faction that had not reneged and whispered in his ear: 'Always told you we'd come to power before you.'

What will happen in the Labour Party is an intriguing question. Everyone, including many of those inside it, had written Labour off. And then, what happened, happened. And now there is undoubtedly a struggle going on inside the party, to see whether it can be transformed into something that represents the aspirations of the young generation. If it doesn't, they'll leave - politics is very volatile today. This is what I hope people at the top of Labour understand: that nothing can be taken for granted for too long, because the young have no institutional loyalties - the people who've joined Labour have joined as individuals. The trade union-Labour link was a link of institutions. There is no such thing today - trade-union membership has gone right down all over Europe, in Britain there's been a huge decline. So, if people feel that they've been let down badly, and that Labour can't deliver on the promises it made in its first term, they will just walk out and leave, and then you'd be left with god knows what. Meanwhile new campaigns are being mounted against Corbyn to discredit him at any cost, including that of a Labour defeat. Blair has publicly appealed to the Tories to join in a common struggle to ditch the referendum result as the only way to defeat Corbyn. I think Corbyn can win. The fact that he doesn't look or behave like a traditional politician is a plus for most people who have come back to Labour or discovered left social-democratic politics for the first time.

David Edgar's solo show 'Trying it On', for which this interview was conducted as research, begins a national tour at Warwick Arts Centre on 7 June.

Tariq Ali's latest book is The Dilemmas of Lenin: Terrorism, War, Empire, Love, Revolution.

Tariq Ali and David Edgar

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