

A Tribute to István Mészáros (1930–2017)

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The Marxist political philosopher István Mészáros, who was born in 1930 in Hungary, died in the UK on 1 October 2017. He had lived in England or Scotland most of the time since he left Budapest after the brutal suppression of the anti-Stalinist revolution in 1956. Following a stroke in September, he was being cared for at Margate in Kent, near the house at Ramsgate where, a few years previously, he had moved with his books from the home in Charles Dickens's much-loved town of Rochester that he had shared—until her premature death in 2007—with his near-life-long companion and co-thinker, Donatella Morisi. As Hillel Ticktin has written, Mészáros's death is "a loss to the left and to humanity" of a man dedicated to "enlightening people on the nature of the movement to socialism." Marxism has lost one of the most creatively original and impassioned thinkers of the second half of the 20th and the early 21st centuries.

A major assessment of the seminal possibilities of Mészáros's many, often formidably lengthy, publications will most productively, in my view, be the outcome of collective analysis and debate. *Critique*—a journal of which he was an early supporter, in which he placed some of his articles and on whose editorial board he remained—should be one arena for such an essential critical enterprise; another will surely be *Monthly Review*, the journal in which—and imprint under which—his most recent essays and books have appeared, and in which a number of articles about his work have been published. However, elaborating on Mészáros's personal story should also be part of the discussion that is now surely needed, notably in those parts of Europe, including Britain, where attention to his work has been surprisingly limited; and that story can provide essential context for the exploration of his ideas in the turbulent years ahead. The general significance of Mészáros's thought will be engaged with the more sensuously if

the experiences that made him and shaped his warm and welcoming, but intellectually uncompromising, personality, are better understood.

The 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume believed himself to be living in 'the historical age' and 'in the historical nation': at a moment and in a place, that is to say, when circumstances demanded and made possible new thinking and new insights into the workings of a world undergoing historic change. István Mészáros's distinctively profound sense of what he called 'historical temporality' perhaps owed much to a similar perception of living in a moment, and living in the midst of events, when, in a particular place, a new world was struggling to be born. The events of the defeated Hungarian revolution against Stalinism were dramatic in themselves, but for Mészáros it was the need to understand their root sin the emergent crisis of 20th-century humanity that was to inform the rest of his life. The possibilities immanent in post-Second World War Hungary pointed towards the actualization of socialism, and the significance of the Soviet clamp down had to be understood as far more than simply a political set back: the theoretical challenge it posed was far more profound than one that could be met by restating the original principles of the October Revolution and fighting—however correctly in a formal sense and courageously—against Stalinism. Marx's most basic ideas had to be revisited and reworked in ways that would release his method and the fundamentals of his thought from their 19th-century determinations and prepare for the struggles that, corresponding to no predictable timetable, would increasingly take place in the context of what Mészáros understood as the *historic* and *structural* crisis not simply of capitalism but of the much longer-lasting capital system itself.

In the later 1990s, soon after the publication of his key-work, *Beyond Capital:*

Towards a Theory of Transition (1995), Mészáros promised me that he would consider doing an in-depth, 'life-story' interview—but he would not prioritize it until the building blocks of his theoretical construction were all in place. Had he lived to complete his last three-volume project, *Beyond Leviathan: Critique of the State*, such an interview might have been accomplished. Alas he died with only one volume at a near-publish-able stage—although his extraordinarily disciplined *modus operandi* means that the working notes for the others should make it possible to complete them in a meaningful, if inevitably imperfect, form. However, the interview will now never happen.

What I can write *in lieu* is inevitably limited and I hope others will add to it. István Mészáros lived and died an unbending socialist who early committed himself to the fight *against* injustice and for what he was later to call a 'social metabolism' based on 'substantive equality'—a society, in Marx's terms, in which human beings will live and labour in relations 'worthy of, and appropriate to, their human nature'. With the onset—in the last third of the 20th century—of capital's structural crisis, Mészáros's work focused uncompromisingly on the historic nature of the present period in which the very existence of humanity and its planet is threatened; and on the developing 'actuality of the socialist offensive' which alone can answer in a positive way the question Rosa Luxemburg asked over a century ago: 'socialism or barbarism?'—a dichotomy to which Mészáros would sometimes add: 'or barbarism if *we're lucky!*'

The Hungary in which István Mészáros was born to working-class parents on 19 December 1930 was ruled by the dictator, Admiral Miklós Horthy, who styled himself 'His Serene Highness the Regent of the Kingdom', and who had come to power in 1920 when—following the collapse of Béla Kun's short-lived soviet

republic the previous year and a period of chaotic ‘White Terror’—the victorious Allies of the First World War refused to accept the return of the monarchy. The young István was raised through years of political repression and poverty by his mother, an aircraft-engines factory employee, and his maternal grandmother. At the age of 12, claiming to be four years older—and with Hungary now at war in somewhat reluctant alliance with Hitler—he decided to supplement the family income and went to work at his mother’s factory. He liked to recall an occasion when part of his wage consisted of a piece of jellied pig’s-head that proved to be full of animal hair: the moment he vomited it out in the snow, he said, was when he decided to devote his life to fight inequality and injustice. However, it seems also that, small though it was, his basic wage—supposedly 16, he was categorised as an adult male—was actually higher than that of his long-serving mother, and a commitment to gender equality was born.

Mészáros was a naturally talented boy—intellectually certainly, but talented also in other ways. Before deciding on an academic career, he was auditioned by Hungarian National Opera and advised to train to sing professionally by the renowned Jewish-German conductor Otto Klemperer, who was music director there from 1947 to 1950. On one occasion (a story I regret not having pursued further with him but he could be hard to interrupt when in full flow and the train from Aberdeen was nearing our Edinburgh destination), he played football with Ferenc Puskás, top goalscorer in Europe in 1948 and a legendary striker for the ‘Mighty Magyars’ national team of the post-war years until 1956, and later with Spain.

As a teenager, Mészáros told Chris Arthur and Joseph McCarney of *Radical Philosophy* in 1992, he picked up pamphlets such as Marx’s *The Eighteenth*

Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte and the *Communist Manifesto* in a Budapest bookshop, graduating to Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and other Marxist works. Then a study of Hungarian literature by György Lukács attracted him and he was soon selling treasured possessions to be able to buy more of the author's books. In his mid-teens, he decided that he wanted to study with Lukács, who was Professor of Aesthetics at Budapest's Eötvös University, and—in the new political circumstances—was able to win a scholarship to go there, matriculating, by then 18, in September 1949.

The 'attacks against Lukács had begun in July', said Mészáros, 'and they were very savage attacks. I almost got expelled from the university because of my frequenting his seminars'. Students felt the atmosphere so threatening, he added, that the Institute of Aesthetics 'was almost completely deserted' and the seminar was 'very small'. Lukács—in and out of favour in pre-war Stalinist circles internationally—had played his part in establishing the post-war 'Communist' regime, the Hungarian People's Republic, but he was against authoritarian attempts to impose socialist culture and aesthetics. It was his stand for a measure of cultural tolerance and debate that lay behind the so-called 'Lukács purge', led by the Stalinist Hungarian Party Secretary Mátyás Rákosi—proponent of 'salami tactics' against his opponents—and when the attacks were echoed in the Soviet Union, Lukács's students feared that he would be arrested and must have been concerned about possible consequences for themselves.

The young Mészáros also took up the cause of the Hungarian National Theatre, which had mounted a production of the classic dramatic poem, *Csongor és Tünde*, written in 1830 but not staged until decades later, by the nationalist writer, Mihály Vörösmarty. The original imperial ban had been repeated by the

new Stalinist regime because—having some thematic similarities to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but sceptical about the possibility of earthly happiness—the play was deemed too pessimistic. Following Mészáros's critique of the decision and defence of the work in a two-part article in a leading cultural magazine, the play was reinstated, Mészáros was awarded the prestigious Attila József Prize (surely affording him particular pleasure as József, the great early 20th-century Hungarian poet, was a hero) and Lukács appointed him to be his assistant at his Institute.

The partial thaw that followed Stalin's death in 1953 and the reinstatement of Imre Nagy, out of favour since 1949, to the Hungarian government—as Chairman of the Council of Ministers promoting his political 'New Course'—was brought to an end on the initiative of the Soviet Politburo in April 1955. The Rákosi clique returned. However, discussions begun in *Magyar Írószövetség*, the Hungarian Writers' Association, during the Nagy period continued, a growing challenge to the regime. As the critical year 1956 unfolded—with Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' to the Soviet Party on Stalin's crimes in February—a group of intellectuals, who, with the support of the Writers' Association, had formed the Petöfi Circle, named after the national poet and 1848 freedom fighter, Sandor Petöfi, began to transform it into a forum for regular debates. These were soon attended by thousands and the Circle's magazine was increasingly circulated amongst workers. Historical and philosophical questions were passionately contested—with the debate for the 71st birthday of the reinstated Lukács (the 'grand doyen of the Petöfi Circle' according to one of its historians) particularly celebrated. Mészáros was an enthusiastic participant and his essay on 'The National Character of Art and Literature' was selected to lead one of the Circle's

regular discussion meetings.

In November 1956 the suppression by the Red Army of the workers' uprising—to the origins of which the Petöfi Circle had made a significant contribution—forced Mészáros to consider his future. Earlier that year, he had married Donatella, an Italian he had met in Paris. He had also been named by Lukács to succeed him as professor of aesthetics. However, such an appointment would now be impossible, and in any case Mészáros was well aware of the difficulties that Lukács had endured—and intellectual compromises he had made—in surviving Stalinism. (Lukács *survived* Stalinism, Mészáros later insisted, he was 'not at all reconciled' with it.) A decision to go into exile had to be made quickly, and Lukács—with whom Mészáros, notwithstanding substantial theoretical differences (Lukács had his 'historic limits' Mészáros commented), remained on friendly terms although for the most part at a distance—did not oppose it. Donatella and he gathered together a few possessions—including, he told me, only two books, a work of his own on aesthetics and a copy of Goethe's *Faust*—and left for Italy.

When they left, Mészáros later recalled, 'Lukács had been arrested, but I [had] decided [to go] a little before that, at the time of the second Russian intervention'. He had become 'convinced that there was no more hope for a socialist transformation of Hungary'. What had been 'a very promising uprising to start something new'—in no way 'counter-revolutionary' or envisaging capitalist restoration and when 'in no time at all, workers' councils were formed all over the country'—had been suppressed. The struggle for socialism would, for the time being at least, have to be pursued elsewhere, and he had learned the lesson that it would require to be founded in long-term, strategic rethinking.

The exiled couple, now with a small daughter, lived in northern Italy before spending two years from 1959 to 1961 in London, where Mészáros continued to edit a journal for Hungary's oppositional intellectuals. He had short-term teaching posts at the University of Turin and at University of London's institution for women, Bedford College. An opportunity then arose at the University of St Andrews—the oldest in Scotland, having been established in the mid-15th century. A quiet coastal and somewhat isolated resort amongst the picturesque fishing villages of the 'East Neuk' of Fife, its atmosphere must have provided a sharp contrast to Stalinist Budapest. The attraction was a Department of Philosophy in a country with a distinctive philosophical tradition less in thrall to linguistic logic than that prevailing south of the border, and in a university with a Principal (Vice-Chancellor) who was an inter-nationally distinguished Hegel scholar. T.M. Knox—although himself a conservative man 'untainted with Marxism', as Mészáros commented—was more than willing to embrace a colleague of Lukács, whose *The Young Hegel*, he confessed, had taught him more about the subject than any other single book. Some of Mészáros's fellow academics, however, were not so concerned with their new colleague's intellectual credentials, causing him some initial confusion by asking about his handicap. Grasping that they had not spotted a disability he had been unaware of, he realised he had arrived in the home of golf and its international governing body, the Royal and Ancient, and that playing would be a *sine qua non* of collegiality. He learnt and was soon more than holding his own on Scotland's most famous links.

Mészáros remembered his years in Scotland with affection and, when the question of Scottish independence came on the agenda with a referendum in 2014, urged me—notwithstanding his thinking on the historic limits of the nation

state—to overcome my doubts and treat the vote as an expression of the right of small nations to self-determination, a right Hungary had been denied by Stalinism in 1956. The university's relative remoteness from metropolitan centres was no doubt less of a problem for him than it might have been for other politically engaged intellectuals since he had already decided that the problems of our time cannot be dealt with piecemeal or simply by campaigning and propagandist protests. Without 'a strategic view, there are no every-day solutions', as he told some socialist activists a few years ago; he had understood through his experience in Hungary that the task he must devote himself to involved systematic analysis rather than—however strong the temptation—writing articles that would deal 'only with what is happening at the time of writing'. Throughout his life, he said, he had sought to work 'in a historical perspective', publishing as much as possible as his 'modest...contribution to change.' Nevertheless when the chance came to move to a chair of philosophy at the newly established University of Sussex at Brighton on the south coast of England, he seized it, moving there in 1966 with a young family that now comprised two daughters and a son. (They survive him as do two grandchildren.)

He was to remain at Sussex until 1991—when he retired early as professor emeritus to concentrate on his writing—with the exception of three sabbatical years in the early 1970s when he held a chair at York University, Toronto. The Canadian episode was notable for the attempts of the Canadian Government to have Mészáros deported as a subversive alien—which led to protests from many public intellectuals, such as Isaiah Berlin, and eventually the resignation of the Foreign Minister. That these events did nothing to intimidate Mészáros is indicated by the story that, on a New Year's Eve during the Watergate crisis, he

and some friends who were celebrating the occasion in the traditionally cheerful way, tried to phone the embattled Richard Nixon. They did get through to a White House aide but the President himself was spared their Hogmanay greetings accompanied by the hope that the year to come would bring him everything he deserved!

The move to southern England took Mészáros back towards the centres of political struggle and student militancy in particular but he did not allow the dramatic events of the late 1960s and 1970s to divert him from his strategic goals. Others will have many memories of his and Donatella's quarter-century or so in Sussex where he had a reputation as a good colleague and authoritative figure in defence of academic values, irrespective of differences of political outlook. He sought to engage with Marxist scholars, hosting a series of seminars he later published as *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (1971). Focused on the development of a Marxist discourse for its own sake, he even included in the series the already celebrated historian, Eric Hobsbawm—later to become the British Establishment's officially embraced 'Marxist'—who, unlike most of the Communist Party of Great Britain's intellectuals, had remained a member after the revelations of 1956 and had actually supported the Soviet invasion of Hungary, albeit as he wrote at the time 'with a heavy heart'.

Mészáros's publications prior to taking up the chair at Sussex had included *Satire and Reality*, published in Budapest in 1955, *La rivolta degli intellettuali in Ungheria* (1958) and *Attila József e l'arte moderna* (1964). Broader recognition came with his first major book in English, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (1970), which won the 1971 Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize, giving Mészáros the opportunity to deliver a lecture in which some of the key ideas he was to develop over the rest of

his life were foreshadowed: it was published as *The Necessity of Social Control*. His publisher, Merlin, announced that *Beyond Capital* would appear in 1973 or 1974. This was an ‘unwise’ prediction, Mészáros—who had indeed begun work on the book in May 1969—told a meeting of Edinburgh leftists in 1997: ‘it took another 21 years!’ Yet, he added, there were ‘very good reasons for this [as] I had to answer, to my own satisfaction, three very important questions’.

Most challenging was the first: ‘how was it possible for capitalism to survive despite all the early anticipations, and despite the prolonged crisis of the system?’ Then—and ‘equally important’—‘what happened in the Soviet system: why did it go through the transformations it did, and why did it have to end as it did?’ And ‘the third question’, which was ‘positively related to the previous two’ was:

how is it possible for us to avoid in the future the traps and contradictions which characterised this post-capitalist experience? As a convinced socialist, I say that we have to contemplate the experience of the past, the lessons of the past, with a view to the future.

Discussion of the extent to which Mészáros answered these questions, and indeed developed their scope in the light of the growing threat of social and environmental destruction into the 21st century—and did so to practical effect—will be central to the discourse I believe should now be the response to his intellectual legacy. However, the formidable scale of his achievement can hardly be questioned: it is reflected in a bibliography that includes regular—and usually very substantial—publications throughout the last three decades of the 20th century and the first decade and a half of the 21st. Major works of these years were: *Lukács Concept of the Dialectic* (1972); an edited volume on *Neo-Colonial*

Identity and Counter-Consciousness: the Work of Renato Constantino (1978); *The Work of Sartre: Search for Freedom* (1979; expanded edition with new sub-subtitle, *Search for Freedom and the Challenge of History*, 2012); *Philosophy, Ideology and Social Science* (1986); *The Power of Ideology* (1989); *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (1995); *L'alternativa alla società del capitale: Socialismo o barbarie* (2000); *Socialism or Barbarism: From the 'American Century' to the Crossroads* (2001); *A educação para além do capital* (2005); *O desafio e o fardo do tempo histórico* (2007); *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (2008); *A crise structural do capital* (2009); *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (2009); *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness: Vol. 1, the Social Determination of Method* (2010) and *Vol. 2, The Dialectic of Structure and History* (2011); *The Necessity of Social Control* (2015).

Reprieved from a cancer scare last autumn, one of Mészáros's last hopes—until the fatal stroke soon afterwards—was to be able to see the Latin American and English editions of the first volume of *Beyond Leviathan: Critique of the State* through the press, with two further free-standing volumes of upwards of 200 pages each to come. Parts of the first chapter were published in *Monthly Review* in September 2016 and—under the title, 'Capital's Historic Circle Is Closing: The Challenge to Secure Exit'—in December 2017, with a further instalment promised. In an introduction to the latter article, John Bellamy Foster writes that *Monthly Review Press* is committed to making sure 'that *Beyond Leviathan* will eventually be made available in a form as close as possible to Mészáros's intentions', and he further comments that the sections Mészáros 'selected for prior publication' should in the meantime contribute to 'critical thinking about what he called "the challenge and burden of [our] historical time"'—a proposal to which I hope contributors to *Critique* will also respond.

Focused on his major theoretical project, Mészáros eschewed active involvement in left-wing political groups, but was a regular speaker at Marxist festivals, conferences and other socialist and labour-movement meetings in many parts of the world. He attended—when his health permitted—the World Social Forum that has taken place annually from 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and courted controversy by offering his—albeit critical—support to Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela, where, in 2008, he was awarded the Libertador Prize for Critical Thinking. The economic advisers to the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ drew on his work, which, their leader declared, ‘illuminates the path ahead...toward socialism’. His critical support for Chávez—whose determined resistance to imperialism he admired—understandably raised eyebrows amongst some on the anti-Stalinist left in Europe but Mészáros’s emphasis remained on what he saw as the courageous audacity of the Venezuelans’ anti-imperialist struggle.

Despite being more honoured in Latin America than in his own adopted homeland, and having a prose style that can present a challenge to readers accustomed to applying Orwellian standards of simplicity, Mészáros felt at ease in a British—an ‘English and Scottish’—environment. In his 1992 discussion with *Radical Philosophy*, he described his long standing admiration for anglophone culture—predating his departure from Hungary. He had engaged early with a ‘line of thought from Hobbes to the great figures of the English and Scottish Enlightenment’: they ‘meant a hell of a lot’ to him, ‘had a great message for the future’ and had been ‘an integral part’ of his own work. He was also, he said, a lover of ‘English and Scottish poetry from Shakespeare to the present’. And ‘equally important’ was the fact that he had always ‘thought of England as the country of the Industrial Revolution...[and] a working class with tremendous deep

roots, and that remains despite everything'. It was important, he insisted, 'to relate yourself to something; political and social commitment cannot be...in a vacuum'. His commitment was 'to the working class', and that was how he thought' of the future intellectually...[T]here cannot be social transformation without an agency and the only agency conceivable under the present condition to take us out of this mess is [l]abour'. However, 'we have to rediscover' labour 'in the sense Marx was talking about' it 'for ourselves under our present conditions'.

If Mészáros's work frustrates some left-wing activists whose socialism—even their sense of political identity—had become bound up with a commitment to particular theoretical *nostra* (often adhered to without any ongoing test of empirical reality), it is perhaps, as I have suggested, because his own defining life-experiences were such as to focus his mind determinedly on what he saw as the most essential questions of the epoch. As the Stalinist system at last approached its collapse in the 1980s, some of us—who, throughout the years in which Mészáros's theoretical project had been maturing, had devoted ourselves to activist politics of the various Trotskyist sects—began to explore wider theoretical horizons. Mészáros was a generous and unprejudiced interlocutor. In 2012, he participated in a discussion about revolutionary agency with erstwhile Trotskyists and others that took place in the light of the publication of former long-standing Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) member Cliff Slaughter's aptly titled *Bonfire of the Certainties* (and subtitled *the Second Human Revolution*). Influenced by Mészáros, it is one of a number of books in which Slaughter confronts the limited and often misguided conception of Marxism that had informed the practice of (amongst other such groups) the WRP—founded in 1973 on the basis of an impressionistic, theoretically ill-founded concept that a revolutionary situation

was imminent, requiring the leadership of a 'revolutionary party' to actualize it—and argues for uncompromisingly radical rethinking.

At that meeting, Mészáros focused on the main question:

“I think,” he said, “we all agree [about] the tremendous problems facing the labour movement, the working-class movement. So many things have turned out to be extremely grave, and the big problem for the future is to grasp the nature of the crisis that we face.”

The obstacles in the path of socialist transformation, as he expressed it elsewhere, are 'Himalayan': indeed, 'the mountain to be climbed' is like 'many Himalayas on top of one another' that have to be overcome without being able to exploit 'native Sherpas for the hard work'. Rather we 'must do it ourselves, and we can do it only if we are willing to confront the real stakes and the real obstacles' (*The Necessity of Social Control*, p. 297). It was from that point of view, I think, that he welcomed a discussion with comrades willing to consider a conflagration of past shibboleths. 'I...pay tribute to...Cliff Slaughter', he said, because he has 'remained firmly in a revolutionary orientation even if the organization he was attached to was...extremely problematical'. In his contribution to that discussion—a transcript of which I can make available via *Critique* on request—Mészáros dealt with a number of key questions in a historically concrete way. These included the meaning of state power and the inadequacy of the idea of achieving socialism by taking it over, and the 'extremely problematical' conception that 'communist consciousness' can be taken 'from the outside' into the working class. '[A]fter the Russian Revolution,' he said, 'what is "from the outside" when the state becomes the party, Lenin's party? It is no longer "outside", no longer "from the outside": it is

from above'. Clarifying this was crucial in deconstructing the Trotskyist 'notion of the "deformed workers' state";' to which, said Mészáros, his reaction was

"on which planet did it happen? Apparently there was supposed to be this 'deformed workers' state' in the Soviet Union—of which I saw absolutely no sign anywhere. But for a long time you [in the WRP] were considering building a revolutionary party on the basis of that kind of conception; and then you also talked about a 'deformed workers' state' in the 'Peoples' Democracies'.

Well, I was born and brought up in one of them, in Hungary!"

However, Mészáros went on to acknowledge, it is easier 'to say what... [we] should be against, to say what has to be demolished or abolished' than 'to say what must be put in its place'. There can be no answer to that without a proper evaluation of 'the nature of the present historical crisis'.

Humanity never faced a crisis even remotely comparable to what we have today. In capitalism, crisis is the normality. It is a regular, periodical renewal of crisis, of cyclical crisis. But I always insist that, in the last forty or fifty years, the crisis we have been facing, and face today, is absolutely different. The crisis of today is the structural crisis of the whole system, not just of the capitalist system, but of the whole capital system — because capitalism didn't fall out of the sky. It came on the foundations of a very long historical process, preceded by thousands of years of one form or another of capital. And the problem of the future, when we contemplate it, is that all the parties, even the revolutionary parties are always trying to fit in to the existing institutional framework.

The problem with the various socialist internationals, since Marx — acknowledging it had reached its historic limit — moved the First International away from Europe, was that they had been unable to transcend this limitation. In

that situation many theories have been adduced to obscure Marx's most fundamental conceptions. '[E]xtremely problematical', for example, is the concept of 'the so-called advanced capitalist societies'. What does it mean:

Capitalist society is a putrefying society... An advanced capitalist society is advanced only in the sense that it is capitalistically advanced. But the capitalistic advancement is towards becoming ever more destructive — and it has... reached a point in its own development when the destruction of humanity is on the agenda of this great 'advanced capitalist society'.

In confronting the future, it is necessary to overcome all the 'sociological ramifications and divisions' that are introduced in the literature to mystify the category of 'labour', or 'the working class': it is deliberately 'reduced to the industrial working class' in order to obfuscate Marx's concern with his 'fundamental category' which was 'the historical confrontation between capital and labour.' On that basis, Mészáros insisted he did not believe in 'any strategy for the future transformation' that was anything other than 'a revolutionary transformation'. The efforts of most of the workers' parties of the past to 'fit in to the framework of the parliamentary system... [which from its origins] was never meant for the working class' have been shown to be tragically misguided: the 'working class was not even on the agenda when the parliamentary system was established. At a certain point... [it] was allowed to fit in to it, as the "labour movement" or the social-democratic movement.' However, from the outset, Marx — as is shown by his comments in critiquing the Gotha Programme — was 'desperately unhappy... about this type of development... the type of movement forward which was within this sort of framework'. Even the WRP had participated in the parliamentary process, diverting attention from 'the reality of the situation',

which must lie:

in the need to take control of the material basis of society; because, without that, talk of any aspect of politics amounts to nothing...[If] you talk about taking power without trying...[to take] control of other aspects of life—if you don't address yourself to the fundamental nature of the material power in our society—you don't get anywhere.

This discussion, he concluded, should be 'an ongoing enterprise, one of examining things without any fear of offending anything in the past'.

We are all here committed to a radical socialist transformation—without which there is no future, no humanity—in the quite literal sense of humanity surviving into the foreseeable future. And the Marxian conception of a historical alternative—that is what has to be at the centre of it all. What kind of social order can be historically viable for the future? This must be the approach now, because the total bankruptcy of all the capitalist countries is a very novel phenomenon—it is post-Second World War—and the most disastrously bankrupt country in this world is the United States of America, which is regarded as the great powerhouse of this 'advanced' capitalist system. A totally bankrupt system is incapable of operating for the future on a long-term historical perspective. And in my view the only way we can examine seriously these problems which are unavoidable for all of us is to address ourselves to this great difficulty and I wish all of us success in that respect.

That final comment, which could have been addressed to any meeting of socialist militants, could, I think, serve as István Mészáros's valediction. Yet one final word should be recorded. At his funeral in Rochester—where, at a gathering of family and close friends, he was buried with Donatella, whose death had devastated him but to whose memory he dedicated the ongoing work that he so

nearly brought to completion—his eldest daughter recalled one source of inspiration to which he seldom referred to directly in his writing.

Although her father was in no way religious, she said, he drew strength from a book that went on to play a part in Christian-Marxist dialogues, Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954–1959)—*The Principle of Hope*. It is a three-volume, unorthodox and eclectic, commentary on Marxism—which, whatever its difficulties, holds open the door to a materialism that is full of life, its joys and possibilities—by a thinker who had once been close to Lukács but had developed serious differences with him in the 1930s. A passage towards the end of the first volume includes the assertion that the 'most dogged enemy of socialism is not only...great capital, but equally the load of indifference, [of] hopelessness'. Without that, 'great capital would stand' exposed, and notwithstanding 'all mistakes in propaganda...there would not...[have been such] delays until socialism ignites in the massive majority whose interests belong to it, though it does not yet know it.' Bloch excoriates the 'paralysis' engendered by 'pessimism' and sees 'even the most rotten optimism' as a 'stupefaction' from which there is at least the possibility of a necessary 'awakening' to the 'liberating truth'—which is the recognition of 'a humanity that is finally and socially possible'.

For István Mészáros, his daughter suggested, 'the principle of hope' was embodied in a 'life-affirming outlook...crucial to any kind of progress', the saving grace for someone whose life had been lived amongst the disasters and ongoing dangers that the opening of the Pandora's box of the 20th century had released. It is a principle that should perhaps underpin the critical discourse that I hope Mészáros's legacy will inspire.