

Björn Kumm:

Impressions on the Bernal-symposium*

John Desmond Bernal was one of the outstanding scientists of his time. He was also one of the outstanding Communists of his time. John Desmond Bernal saw absolutely no contradiction between science — in his case physics, specifically crystallography — and his political beliefs and activities. On the contrary, Bernal conceived of his scientific activities and his clear stand as a supporter of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin as two integrating parts of a whole. He was not a Communist in his spare time. His politics was part and parcel of his entire personality, and he saw Soviet society as the opportunity to realize science of a truer kind than the bourgeois variety of which he admittedly was himself a product, and at the same time he saw the Soviet Union as a society to be built and administered according to truly scientific guidelines, a society where science was to be the driving force.

Fifty years ago, in 1939 when the world once again went to war, one of Bernal's

fundamental books, "The Social Functions of Science", was published, and in order to celebrate this anniversary and to discuss the significance of Bernal's thoughts in today's post-Stalinist world, characterized by perestroika and glasnost, the Department of Sociology at Tampere University hosted a symposium on Bernal in December of 1989. The temperature was 20 degrees below zero in Tampere, a cold that nearly became painful, but during three days that the symposium lasted debates at times became quite heated. The cold war is over, and had in fact recently been declared defunct at the summit meeting between Messrs Bush and Gorbachev during a cruise in the Mediterranean, but the participants at the symposium over J D Bernal did not find it equally simple just to brush off their differences and try to move on without regards to old politics. Was Bernal a prisoner of his illusions about the Soviet state, or was he on the contrary only too conscious about what went on, particularly during the purges of the 30s, and did that not mean that he was an accomplice of Stalin's terror? There were some attempts to find excuses for Bernal, particularly from the representative of the Soviet Academy

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of Sciences and a great deal of praise from his colleague from the GDR.

Bernal's latter-day British colleague Hilary Rose was a great deal harsher in her judgment, but at the same time she also provided more of a total picture of the late J D Bernal, a portrait full of love.

One of the Swedish participants in the symposium, Carl Axel Gemzell, professor of history in Copenhagen, endeavored to put Bernal into a historical and geographical context:

England provides a whole map of different attitudes, and there was an enormous pluralism present there. Bernal represented a particularly politicized section of the scientific community, with his radical political views — he was, as we know, a radical Socialist. But there was also what might be called a moderate wing among scientists which was to play a great role for the future, for the welfare state, maybe more importantly than Bernal. He did represent an extreme view, while those more moderate forces within the scientific community in many ways became very important as founders of what was on its way. I suppose they were more open to compromise. They made an effort to stabilize society as it existed. Bernal wanted to change existing society. He had a Marxist view of society, while these other forces wanted to bring about a compromise where science would play a great role. — What could be said about Cambridge?

— One could claim that Cambridge has played a very great part in all these developments, and that is something that goes back to the nineteenth century. Two things are important here. One is the founding of the Cavendish laboratory which eventually was to play a leading part in the field of science, not only in England but in the entire world. No institution has collected as many Nobel prizes as the Cavendish laboratory. That's one thing. The other is that among English scientists, not least among natural scientists and later on social scientists, there was eventually a very great

political commitment, and the Fabian Society which was founded in England in the late nineteenth century gained a very strong foothold in Cambridge, among intellectuals, particularly among natural scientists and social scientists. Sidney and Beatrice Webb played a leading role during many years and developed their idea of a union between science and politics, and they also developed the idea of a social democratic society which would eventually gradually change into some kind of socialism.

— Weren't the Webbs rather enthusiastic about the Soviet Union, too? — Yes indeed. They made a well publicized journey to the Soviet Union during the 1930s and produced a very enthusiastic report in which they denied that there had been any violence or oppression against the peasants or any other of the misdeeds that were being discussed in the 1930s. They were absolutely blind to what went on in the Soviet Union in that respect, and so they produced a glowing defense of the Soviet Union and saw the Soviet Union as a state which had in many ways realized this dream about scientists as politicians... a society run by scientific expertise. That is what they thought had become the real situation in the Soviet Union. They didn't see the strong politicization of that society. They didn't see the terror. It reminds you in a terrifying way how naive scientists can often be in the political field...

But how naive was J D Bernal in his relationship with the Soviet Union? At the Tampere symposium, Vladislav Kelle of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, preferred to look upon Bernal as a victim of his illusions. Bernal, according to Kelle actually did think that the state that Stalin was building was the good Socialist state, where science and politics coincided and became the same thing.

It is a sign of the times that a symposium honoring the memory of one of the most stalwart Soviet sympathizers of the Cold War is attended by delegates from the country he so consistently defended who claim that he was totally in the

dark. Mr Kelle of the Soviet Academy of Sciences quoted — obviously with delight — Heinrich Mann who wrote in his diary: “The idea of socialism was a great idea whose implementation unfortunately got into the hands of villains...”

But is everything that simple? Was it only later that Bernal realized what was going on the Soviet Union? Of course he knew what happened to Nicolai Bucharin, the same Bucharin who in 1931, on Stalin’s order, as the head of an impromptu Soviet delegation visited and delighted scientific England at that year’s international congress of science and history of technology in London. The lectures that Bucharin and his colleagues presented at the congress and even more so the book containing those lectures which the Soviet Embassy succeeded in translating and printing in five days, a world record in many categories, turned a great many young British scientists into passionate Socialists and Soviet supporters. For many years contacts between Bucharin, Bernal and the academic left in Great Britain and Western Europe remained very close and very fertile. Then along came the Moscow trials. Along came Bucharin’s execution. Bucharin became a non-person. And the really sad thing about the whole affair is the fact that Bernal did not lift a finger and did not say a single word to defend his friend.

Bucharin came to London. And Bernal heard him. And the whole young would-be left heard him... and were completely knocked over. Then when Bucharin was rendered into a non-person and completely disgraced, to me was the really sad thing. Bernal seems to have made no defense of him at all, no representation, and, yet, as Bucharin was so important to him in his own work, that would have seemed a necessary and proper step.

Hilary Rose, sociologist and head of the Center for Research on Women at the University of Bradford, gave the most acclaimed lecture at the Tampere symposium on J D Bernal, scientist, politician and also J D Bernal, the man — one who was greatly interested in

women and also greatly loved by women. Her point of departure was Bernal’s own plan, never realized, eventually to write his autobiography in three parts, each in its own color: blue for science, red — of course — for politics, and for his private life, his love life, the color purple.

It was just a nice place to begin, and that was Bernal once talking about how he would write his own biography, which he never did and which still remains to be done — at least a good one remains to be done — when he spoke about how he would write his politics on red, his science in blue, and his personal life, his sexual life in purple. He held, as many people have held in the 60s, a belief in the ideology of sexual liberation... and this of course has different implications for women and for men.

Purple, the color of love... Anyone who took on the task to write a biography of Bernal — the entire man, would run into obvious difficulties. Bernal was in love with many women, warmly, generously but possibly a bit callously. His women belonged to the political left. He kept a respectful distance from his female colleagues in science. They became, says Hilary Rose, in actual practice honorary men — they were respected but also denied their womanhood. There was no mention of Bernal’s many love affairs, particularly not during the 1950s, the heyday of the cold war, when it was important not to feed the yellow press with juicy material for scandalous articles. But even after Bernal’s death, his closest friends and those in charge of his personal files have decided to weed out the most sensitive details — those documents will be classified until the year 2020, which is a great deal longer than most British official secrets.

Bernal’s relationship with women — either as lovers or as sexless co-workers in the scientific laboratory — would, according to Hilary Rose, make a compelling point of departure for a complete biography of the Communist scientist. Feminism has helped us realize what price women pay for what men usually see a uncomplicated sexual freedom.

But feminism also put the spotlight on the type of language and the kind of mentality which actually do exist within supposedly sexually neutral science. It is a man's world. It has been a man's world ever since the time of the first empiricist, Bacon, who was greatly admired by Bernal.

This is a world where language itself is very masculine and very brutal. Science is male, nature female — and nature is supposed to be conquered, undressed, penetrated and forced to yield its innermost secrets. Bernal did not doubt that he was the spokesman of the science of the proletariat. To him science and Marxism were one and the same thing. Science served Marxism, Marxism served humanity, justice and freedom, and I think, says Hilary Rose, that it never once occurred to Bernal that his science did in actual fact serve the interests of men rather than women or that it served the interests of white people rather than black. That is how he thought about things, and you just have to accept that he was a product of his time.

I think for him science and Marxism were one seamless web. He thought that science served Marxism and that Marxism served humanity and justice and liberty, and I don't think it crossed his mind for a moment that it served the interests of men more than women and that it served the interests of white men more than black men... and that is not to be critical about him. It is just to locate him in his historical period.

But was Bernal to that extent rooted in his era that he turned out to be a true British imperialist, like the Fabians, the Webbs and historian and science fiction writer H G Wells? No, says Hilary Rose, it could never become that bad.

Oh no no... British imperialism... after all, the man came from Ireland. You could hardly come from Ireland and be part of British imperialism. It was after all the first British colony and looks tragically like being the last. No, I don't think he was part of that tradition at all. In fact, at a personal level he

was completely magnetic and wonderful. I remember listening to him as a student, and he was absolutely extraordinarily attractive... magnetic personality, great personal warmth, absolutely not imperialist.

But if Bernal, that warm, attractive, magnetic personality, had been revived and found it possible to attend the Tampere symposium, then he would have been challenged in more ways than one in his ambition to speak in the name of science and Marxism and all of mankind, and those challenges are clearly reminiscent of his own ambition and that of his colleagues in the 30s to speak with a greater claim to represent Truth than contemporary established bourgeois science. Through Hilary Rose the Tampere symposium heard the claims of feminists to represent a more truthful kind of knowledge than narrowly male science. A green science which would be more considerate of nature than Bernal was in his rather production-oriented outlook, is entirely conceivable, even though it was not represented in Tampere. And from the Third World, in his case Mexico, there was a challenge from Juan Carlos Escalante who described the dilemma of the scientific community in a so-called underdeveloped country: on the one hand national problems crying out for practically oriented research, on the other concern for one's professional scientific career which in Mexico as in so many other places in the world is actively furthered by one's doing research and getting published with a view of becoming noticed by the big boys, the industrialized countries at the center and their scientific establishment. The Third World scientist who chooses not to participate in that international rat-race remains an outsider on the periphery in very much the same way as the underdeveloped countries and their populations. I don't think they understand me at this symposium, Escalante complained. I don't think they understand the situation of the Third World, least of all what it means to our scientists.

There were many Bulgarians at the Bernal symposium in Tampere, for historical reasons. There had been earlier exchanges between

Finnish and Bulgarian universities — a window of opportunity for Bulgaria in those days when things were more difficult and a chance these days to demonstrate the new of freedom that has suddenly also reached Bulgaria, after the demise of old dictator Zhivkov and the announcement only a few days before the symposium that Bulgaria too would have free democratic elections in the spring.

The Bulgarian delegation did bring — even this time — a political commissar — the difference being that the political commissar, who had his speech interpreted, was now buoyant about the new things going on in Bulgaria and emphasized the need for “democratization” of science. But can you in fact talk about democratization, asked Terttu Luukkonen, one of the Finnish organizers of the symposium, and was immediately seconded by one of the Bulgarian scientists. What we are talking about, said Kostadinka Simeonova, is not democratization but professionalization. We want the scientific community to be able to set its own rules and no longer be directed politically from outside.

The Tampere symposium, which was held to celebrate the fifty year anniversary of J D Bernal's book on the function of science in modern society, in an oblique way became a clash between those who saw themselves as Bernal's successors and those who wanted to get rid of the Bernal inheritance and turn science into a completely independent sector of society. The Bulgarian delegates noted to their great relief that they would not in the future have to abide by pompous statements from Communist party congresses and necessarily do research according to party guidelines. But Hilary Rose who could be said

to represent Western European Marxism and the New Left of the 60s noted sadly that the Eastern European scientists didn't seem to want much more than academic freedom, giving lip service to the new democratic order and possible popular demands on science but mainly preserving science as the business of scientists, with no concern for the society outside.

This elitist conception of science, one that shows no responsibility towards society at large, was the very thing that the new left in Europe and the US in the 60s and the 70s were up against. What they meant by democratization of science was the participation of the people, popular accountability of science. The eastern European delegates at the Bernal symposium in Tampere wanted to liberate science from the fetters of the party, but they did not, apparently, wish to replace those fetters with any other kind of responsibility, let alone towards the people.

What would Bernal have said about all this? What would he have said in a time and age when the entire socialist project is collapsing? For people of Bernal's generation I think it is truly horrific, says Hilary Rose.

In fact, we were talking the other day about one of his close co-workers, a man who worked with Bernal all his life. What do you think he will do? I think he will die, I think his heart will be broken.

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