Chapter-V

THE POLITICS OF THE TERRORISTS
The treatment of popular revolt and revolutionary intrigues in *Nostromo* amply indicated that Conrad was slowly moving towards new and hitherto unexplored terrains. From the familiar and favourite world of adventure at sea and tales exotic romance in distant lands, he was moving towards the world of surreptitious plots and outrages. This is evident from the short stories written between *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*. What is notable about this shift is his lack of any intimate acquaintance with the underworld of those plots and outrages that were a product of the anarchist movement and the anarchists. In the letters written to his friends and publishers during the composition of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad continually pleads ignorance about the goings-on in the underworld and the seemingly intractable nature
of the material.

Yet Conrad was alert and active to what was happening around him, particularly if it had any bearing on Poland or Russia. In his letters written to Spiridon Kliszczewski, as early as in 1885, Conrad shows his awareness and concern for Polish matters. He comments happily on the defeat of the Liberal government, which followed a policy of friendship with Russia, in 1885 General Elections, anticipating from this the hope of improved relations with Germany, "the only power with whom an anti-Russian alliance would be useful, and even possible, for Great Britain."\(^1\) However, this hope did not last long. He was terribly disappointed by the developments in England and his analysis of the situation is very perspicuous even though a little hasty: "The newly enfranchised idiots have satisfied the yearnings of Mr. Chamberlain's herd by cooking the national goose according to his recipe.... Joy reigns in St. Petersburg, no doubt, and profound disgust in Berlin."\(^2\) In fact, Conrad's political utterances in the five or six odd letters written to Spiridon Kliszczewski about this time, make him appear both a reactionary and an arch-conservative. The second of these letters, written from Calcutta, contains one of his virulent diatribes against

\(^1\)G. Jean Aubry, Life and Letters I, p. 80.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 84.
the onslaught of social-democratic ideas as a result of the untimely extension of suffrage in England:

Where's the man to stop the rush of social-democratic ideas? The opportunity and the day have come and are gone! England was the only barrier to the pressure of infernal doctrines born in continental back-slums.... Socialism must end in Caesarism.3

However, as he advanced in years, Conrad's political outlook became more mature and objective. Of course, throughout his life, he remained an anti-Russian and he never ceased to believe that nihilistic and anarchistic tendencies were ingrained in the Russian temperament under the Tsarist dispensations.

Although anarchism was largely a Russian movement in the nineteenth century, its impact was felt in Europe and England. The term 'anarchist' covered a wide range of ideologies and activities in the Victorian England. Prince Kropotkin, the anarchist philosopher of Russia made London his abode for sometime in the last decade of the nineteenth century and influenced a group of highly placed and socially respectable persons. William Morris of the Pre-Raphaelite fame, was greatly influenced by Kropotkin and founded an anarchist group in England. Bernard Shaw was another stout adherent.

3G.Jean Aubry, Life and Letters, p.84.
The split between Marx and Bakunin resulted in the dissolution of the First International in 1876 and the revolutionary movement split into different factions. As regards anarchism, the great tradition of Godwin and Proudhon, continued by Bakunin and Kropotkin, it degenerated into terrorist tactics in the hands of lesser adherents. William Hyndman, the English interpreter of Marx, founded the Social Democratic Federation, which ran counter to the Marxist ideology and gradually developed into a proto-anarchist movement. Besides, large numbers of self-proclaimed anarchists from all over the world took refuge in London. The whole of Europe was terrified. There were a number of attempts on the lives of royalty and eminent statesmen. The assassination of the Queen of Austria, of the King of Italy, of the Presidents of France and the United States, of the Prime Minister of Spain were all attributed to anarchists.

Conrad was in France in 1894 about which time the anarchist-terrorist campaign reached its crescendo. If he had not absorbed its full impact at the time, his later association with Ford Madox Ford and Cunningham Graham must have had acquainted him with its workings. Moreover, temperamentally Conrad was inclined to see the world as 'anarchy', as a gigantic circus given over to acts of futility. "By Jove", he wrote to Graham,
"If I had the necessary talent, I would like to go for the true anarchist..." This, however, should not be taken to mean an unqualified approval of the anarchist activities. As The Secret Agent and the short stories on the same theme demonstrate, his enthusiasm was qualified by critical reservations of a very serious kind. His fictional world is peopled with despicable shams and pretenders rather than true anarchists.

Conrad wrote a number of fairly long stories between the completion of Nostromo and the beginning of writing on The Secret Agent. Of these, three stories are relevant here, viz., "Gasper Ruiz", "An Anarchist" and "The Informer: An Ironic Tale". They are important inasmuch as they show Conrad's continued preoccupation with the complex world of anarchy and political intrigue at this time. "Gasper Ruiz" is a spin off from Nostromo. It has the same ambience. The setting, again, is South America with a revolution in the ferment. The central character, Gasper Ruiz, also bears striking resemblance to Nostromo. He is strongly built and short of words; he is the favourite of his people and their natural leader. He is drawn to revolutionary warfare much against his wishes and is exploited by all political positions.

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^Jean Aubry, Life and Letters II, p.60.
Embroiled in the struggle between the Royalist and the Republican forces, Gasper Ruiz is used by both the parties and finally dies fighting against the Republicans. Nostromo, it may be recalled, supports the aristocratic class that keeps him down and fights the "rabble" who represent his own class. When he wakes up to the reality that the upper class merely exploited him, he reverses his sympathy and steals the silver from them.

Gasper's predicament is the same. He is forced to fight for the Royalists against his own class; his own class ruthlessly exploits him when he rises to power. In the final analysis, the story is a parable of the inevitable impingement of political forces on unwilling and innocent individuals in modern times and the inescapable ruin that must follow such an eventuality.

"An Anarchist" is a disturbing tale replete with ambiguities. It has the germ of an idea that lacks crystallisation. The so-called anarchist of the story is, again, an innocent and unconcerned individual, Paul, who is an engineer by profession. He gets implicated in anarchism through a ridiculous accident. The police round him up for shouting anarchist slogans while drunk. In the trial, through the stupidity of an ambitious socialist lawyer, he gets sentenced for a long term. On his release, he looks for a job but does not find any. He
falls in with some anarchists, is convicted of bank robbery and gets transported to the penal settlement of St. Joseph's island, French Guiana. Here, the convicts in the whole settlement put up a mutiny and Paul, along with two of his comrades, Simon the Biscuit and Mafile, escapes. While on the escape-boat, Paul murders both of his comrades because, according to him, they are responsible for his abasement:

"I murdered their lies, their promises, their menaces, and all my days of misery. Why they could not have left me alone after I came out of prison?.... A black rage came upon me -- the rage of extreme intoxication."

But the murder of his comrades does not bring him real liberty. Again he becomes a virtual prisoner in a penal settlement condemned for cattle, the industrial estate of a meat-extract company. Paul's position is exploited there by the manager. Thus he is a victim of both anarchism and capitalism. As a story, "An Anarchist" lacks maturity, but it clearly marks a step forward towards the technique and attitude that Conrad was to adopt in The Secret Agent.

"The Informer: An Ironic Tale" is the most significant among the stories on the theme under discussion. The anonymous narrator is a collector of Chinese bronzes and porcelain. He has a friend in Paris who is a

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A Set of Six, pp.158-9.
curious collector, not of "porcelain, nor of bronzes, nor pictures, nor medals, nor stamps" -- but of "acquaintances". This friend introduces the narrator to Mr. X, who is both a notorious anarchist -- "the mysterious and unknown Number One of desperate conspiracies" and also an "enlightened Connoisseur of bronzes and china." The narrator takes Mr. X, who has come to visit him, through his collection of curios after which both of them sit down to an elaborate and elegant dinner. During the meal, the anarchist tells the narrator a story of underground intrigue and betrayal involving the Hermione street group of anarchists in London. It seems that a double agent, Sevrin, has somehow infiltrated this anarchist group and passes out all information relating to its clandestine activities to police. As a result, all the anarchist conspiracies end in miscarriages and failures. The anarchists at the centre in Brussels are worried and have sent Comrade X to London to investigate the case and meet the "young Lady Amateur of anarchism". Comrade X stages a mock police raid on the Hermione Street premises and the secret agent Sevrin is tricked into revealing his real identity. Sevrin admits that he has betrayed his fellow revolutionaries

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7 *A Set of Six*, p.73.
'through conviction' and poisons himself. One of the aspects of the story has been analysed by R.A. Gekoski in the following manner: "The story... gains some impact through the device of assuming the values of anarchism to be the norm, and the 'betrayal' of the informer to be an aberration from accepted behaviour."\(^{10}\) Comrade X, however, narrates the story to drive home the point that much of the support for the anarchist movement comes from the very class the anarchists are out to destroy: "Don't you know yet... that an idle and selfish class loves to see mischief being made, even if it is made at its own expense?"\(^{11}\) Comrade X is critical of the lady anarchist who, according to him, is an irresponsible amateur, surveying the world from her upper class ivory tower of "accomplished and innocent gestures", of "conventional signs", and "the consummate and hereditary grimaces that in a certain sphere of life take the place of feelings."\(^{12}\) The class identity of the anarchists is held up for scrutiny by Conrad, but it is not free from ambiguity; because Comrade X himself "belonged to a noble family and could have called himself Victome X de la Z if he chose."\(^{13}\) His hobbies and bearings are no less aristocratic. He was a collector of bronze and china.

\(^{11}\) A Set of Six, p. 78.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 81.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 78.
and took his meals in exclusive restaurants. Of course, Comrade X is no amateur; he is a deadly professional, a messenger of chaos, ("There is no amendment to be got out of mankind except by terror and violence")\textsuperscript{14}, an impostor and a secret agent hiding his anarchist allegiance beneath the impeccable refinement and his fame as a revolutionary writer.

One important aspect illustrated in these stories is that the anarchists are not unusual or extraordinary human beings. In \textit{The Secret Agent}, the purpose of the sub-title, 'A Simple Tale' seems to remind the readers how simple men really are even when they are the destroyers of society or their pursuers. One is struck to see how narrow a gulf exists between ordinary law-abiding citizens and the maker of bombs. In "The Informer", the narrator is "a quiet and peaceable product of civilisation"\textsuperscript{15}; Comrade X is the world's dreaded terrorist. And yet the two are very much alike in their habits and tastes. In fact, there is a suggestion that there are secret affinities between the narrator and Comrade X, just as Marlow, in a moment of epiphany, discovers his affinity with Mr. Kurtz. However, in the anarchist stories, Conrad also introduces popular beliefs about the

\textsuperscript{14}A \textit{Set of Six}, p.77.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p.76.
anarchists that set them apart from ordinary human beings. The narrator in "The Informer" muses:

Anarchists, I suppose, have no families .... Organisation into families may answer to a need of human nature, but in the last instance it is based on law, and therefore must be odious and impossible to an anarchist .... Does a man of that persuasion still remain an anarchist when alone, quite alone and going to bed for instance?  

The other important aspect of the story "The Informer" consists in the fact that it anticipates in significant ways the events and techniques in two of the major political novels -- The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes. Both these novels have as their central figure a secret agent who infiltrates groups of revolutionaries and anarchists and who is in the end exposed and either tortured or killed. More specifically, the character of the professor, the perfect anarchist in The Secret Agent, seems only a slight variation on Comrade X of "The Informer". In Under Western Eyes, it is not any character but the technique of narration itself that bears resemblance to that of "The Informer". The narrator in both cases is a sensible and civilised gentleman of European culture and the significance of events filters through his consciousness.

16A Set of Six, p.75.
The stories discussed above may be said to have prepared Conrad sufficiently for a detailed and sustained treatment of anarchy in *The Secret Agent*. The actual incident on which the narrative hinges is, however, taken from real life, namely, the Greenwich Bomb Outrage that took place in 1894. There is general agreement that this is the source of *The Secret Agent*. In the 'Author's Note' to the novel, Conrad alludes to an 'omniscient friend' presumably Ford Madox Ford, and says that the tale, "came to me in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists or rather anarchist activities."\(^{17}\) He also refers to the reading of the "rather summary recollections of an Assistant Commissioner of police."\(^{18}\) Of course, Conrad certainly had other sources for secret political interference by foreign powers. He wrote to Cunningham Graham in his letter of 7 Oct., 1917: "Mr. Vladimir was suggested to me by that scoundrel, General Seliwerstow, whom Padlewski shot (in Paris) in the '90s .... There were peculiar circumstances in that case."\(^{19}\) Besides, as was always the case with Conrad, his knowledge about anarchist activities must have been supplemented by his readings of anarchist publications of the kind sold by Verloc in his shop: "... a few apparently old copies of

\(^{17}\) 'Author's Note', *The Secret Agent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.XXXIII.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.XXXV.

\(^{19}\) G.J.Aubry, *Life and Letters II*, p.60.
obscure newspapers badly printed, with titles like The Torch, The Gong --rousing titles.\textsuperscript{20}

Conrad's exposition of the Greenwich Bomb Outrage bears striking resemblance to the actual event. The actual perpetrator of the outrage was one Martial Bourdin who did indeed blow himself up like Stevie, his fictional counterpart. The police report describes Bourdin as having been "inadequately developed" and having "silky hair"; we find Stevie possessing the same attributes. Further, the Greenwich explosion was seen by the English Press as a foreign effort to force the British Government to stop harbouring revolutionaries. In the novel, the Greenwich Observatory episode is instigated by an official of a foreign embassy while an anti-anarchist conference was in the offing in Milan. The purpose was to malign the anarchists who took refuge in England and thus compel the British Government to take stringent measures against them.

Verloc, the secret agent is a man of uncertain foreign extraction and dubious antecedents. He is a typical Conradian character -- effete and indolent, lacking vitality or initiative. He may be said to be the direct

\textsuperscript{20} The Secret Agent, p.3.
descendent of Almayer, the lethargic dreamer: "His eyes were naturally heavy; he had an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed."\(^{21}\)

There is a 'mean aspect' to the life lived by the Verlocs at the Bret street in Soho. The atmosphere is slimy, shabby and dismal. There is an uncanny air about Verloc's pornography shop with its 'shady wares' and mysterious evening visitors. Conrad posits the conflict between Verloc's private and public values in the very first chapter: "... he carried on his business of a seller of shady wares, exercised his vocation of a protector of society and cultivated his domestic virtues."\(^{22}\)

Verloc has been in London for about eleven years in the employ of a foreign embassy (probably Russian). He was the most trusted secret agent during the time of Baron Stott-Wartenheim, so secret that he was never designated by name, but by the symbol delta. His "warnings had the power to change the schemes and the dates of royal, imperial, and grand ducal journeys, and sometimes cause them to be put off altogether!"\(^{23}\) But Verloc is, in fact, a double agent. He is at once the confidant of and a sort of guide to the anarchist

\(^{21}\) The Secret Agent, p.4.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., p.5.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., p.27.
revolutionaries and a police informer. The foreign embassy has been paying him regularly for his act of espionage and yet he is paid and protected by the police. Ideologically, Verloc is committed to neither side. He sees his work, it is true, in terms of the "vocation of a protector of society", but he does it not out of loyalty to the concept of social order, but because "protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury." There is no indication that he seriously believes that the fissip erous elements upon whose activities he reports present any real threat to the present order; "... at the notion of a menaced social order he would perhaps have winked to himself if there had not been an effort to make in that sign of scepticism". He is a double agent because he has discovered that he can eke out an easy and comfortable living by playing the two contending sides against each other -- fostering radical activities while generating reactionary fears.

Thus, Verloc's position is a precarious one. The protection of the existing social order is a condition of his own security, but this can be maintained as long as his activities in both spheres, with both the

\[24\text{The Secret Agent, p.5.}\]
\[25\text{Ibid., p.12.}\]
\[26\text{Ibid.}\]
reactionaries and the radicals, does not take any definitive shape. That is, he must always maintain a delicate balance taking care not to provoke repressive measures by his employers that could possibly suppress anarchist activities against which he reports, or to allow his anarchist comrades to effectively build up an assault that might succeed in disrupting the social order upon which his comforts depend. In other words, he must remain ineffectual. The paradoxical nature of his position is reflected in Mr. Vladimir's reaction to Verloc's appearance of well-fed comfort and complacency. For all his 'air of moral nihilism', Verloc "looked uncommonly like a master plumber come to present his bill". He is, in addition, married, a manifestation of conventional stability that reduces his credibility as an anarchist. Mr. Vladimir leaps on this admission of normality by Verloc and refuses to believe any such fib: "Anarchists don't marry.... They can't. It would be apostasy.... Why, you must have discredited yourself completely in your own world by your marriage." 

Yet, Verloc has not discredited himself with any of the parties. Like Nostromo, he has a reputation almost unassailable. He mixes freely with the

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27 The Secret Agent, p.27
28 Ibid., p.36.
anarchists who use his shop as a meeting place. His relationship with Heat, the Chief Inspector of police, is also quite cordial though as a matter of policy, they meet rarely. Verloc's reputation, like Nostromo's is the mainstay of his livelihood. It appears from his conversation with Mr. Vladimir that he has been in the pay of the embassy for eleven years. But as his original ambassadorial patron is dead now, his position is threatened. Mr. Vladimir, the First Secretary, a man with a "mocking, cynical manner" is not happy with Verloc's performance and mocks his claim to political sophistication. He makes caustic personal remarks on Verloc's corpulence and lethargy. Verloc makes a feeble attempt to defend himself, but without much confidence. He claims that he has a remarkable voice that proved an asset in his assignments and that he speaks French fluently. In addition, he is one of the vice presidents of the F.P., i.e., The Future of the Proletariat, a society "not anarchist in principle, but open to all shades of revolutionary opinion." Vladimir is unimpressed and continues in his half-mocking, half-threatening strain. He accuses Verloc of ineffectuality: "You give yourself as an agent provocateur. The proper business of an agent provocateur is to provoke. As far

as I can judge from your record kept here, you have
done nothing to earn your money for the last three yea-
rs." Eventually, he confronts Verloc with the ultima-
tum, 'no work, no pay' that sends cold shivers down Ver-
loc's spine.

After effectively threatening Verloc, Vladimir puts
forward his plan of action before him. His plan is de-
signed to shock the British out of their laxity and the
policy of indulgence to anarchists by bringing about a
series of outrages, not necessarily sanguinary, but eff-
ectively terrifying. Vladimir dismisses attack on Roy-
alty or religion because, according to him, they are no
longer held in reverence by the people. What is sacred
to the middle class and the bourgeoisie is science and
property which constitute the foundation of modern civi-
lisation. So the outrage must be directed against scie-
ntific property: "You anarchists should make it clear
that you are perfectly determined to make a clean sweep
of the whole social creation." If Verloc wants to
retain his job, he must destroy the "first meridian".
Nothing short of this colossal absurdity will do. Vladi-
mir who is a hard-headed anarchist in his mind knows
better than any one else the ultimate terror of

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30 The Secret Agent, p.25.
31 Ibid., p.32.
nihilism and the psychological impact of his scheme:

...what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, almost unthinkable; in fact mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion or bribes.\(^{32}\)

Verloc's cohorts are Michaelis, Alexander Ossipon, the Professor and Kurl Yundt -- a bunch of ineffectual anarchists, rather one dimensional figures. The only thing they share in common is that all of them, with the possible exception of the Professor, are lazy and parasitical, depending on the conventions and normality of ordinary social life they condemn. They have an aversion to work and live on the credulity of other people. Ideologically, their position is rather vague. Conrad does not give them differentiating political labels, though he sometimes lets the dialogue indicate several positions. Michaelis can be described as a visionary Marxist whereas Yundt seems to be a crude follower of Bakunin. Ossipon has a narrowly materialistic view of science which does not bear much scrutiny. In the scheme of the novel, as Edward Garnett points out, "... These character sketches supply us with a working analysis of anarchism that is profoundly true, though the

\(^{32}\) The Secret Agent, p.33.
philosophical anarchism of certain creative mind is, of course, out of the range of the author's survey." \(^{33}\)

In *The Secret Agent* anarchism is represented in its extreme form by the Professor who knows no other language than that of violence. Conrad introduces him in Chapter Four as a shabby little man in spectacles. His conversation with Ossipon reveals that he is an explosive expert who is prepared 'in principle' to give explosives to anyone that asks him for them. He is unhappy about the way of life, "... which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations" \(^{34}\) has circumscribed Man and has resulted in the evolution of the "condemned social order". \(^{35}\) The Professor is oppressed by human limitations and endeavours to do away with them by destroying the whole social order that is responsible for those limitations. By sheer force of personality and singleness of purpose, the Professor has made himself secure from the police and his enemies. They know that he always keeps "the last handful of his wares" \(^{36}\) in his pocket, and his finger on a rubber ball which can detonate that package. This is enough to blow himself and

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\(^{34}\) *The Secret Agent*, p.68.


whoever comes in his contact to pieces. The Professor is secure in the knowledge that "they know". The only thing that plagues him is the fact that the whole process takes not less than twenty seconds which, according to him, is too long an interval to make the strategy foolproof. Hence he is fiercely dedicated to the business of making the perfect detonator, a task that is of supreme importance to him.

In his letter of Oct. 7, 1907, to Cunningham Graham, Conrad says that he endeavoured to invest the Professor with "a note of perfect sincerity". The Professor is seriously committed to the values he professes. In contrast to the other idle anarchists, he works fourteen hours a day and sometimes goes hungry. His criticism of other anarchists springs from this absolute dedication to his mission:

You (revolutionists) plan the future, you lose yourself in reveries of economical systems derived from what is; whereas what is wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life. That sort of life will take care of itself if you make room for it.

The Professor holds the view that a society whose foundations are unjust has no right to survive. He believes

37 G. Jean Aubry, Life and Letters II, p. 60
38 The Secret Agent, pp. 69-70.
39 Ibid., p. 73.
that it can be destroyed and made over again according to the ideas of perfect justice. His fanatical obsession with destruction has its basis in this belief. Inspite of the lack of moderation in his views, the Professor offers authentic insights into some aspects of society and makes a genuinely devastating criticism of its inner contradictions. As he points out, the democratic tradition of liberalism may tolerate all forms of radicalism but deprive the radicals of any pressing desire for revolutionary action. He advocates "madness and despair"\textsuperscript{40} as a lever to move the world because, democratic tolerance and indulgence makes for the gradual emasculation of the anarchists. The Professor refers to Ossipon himself and his comrades as illustrations. To Ossipon's exasperated question, "What do you want from us?" the Professor answers without batting an eyelid, "A perfect detonator."\textsuperscript{41}

The Professor displays keen insight into the way society harbours antagonistic elements. This insight helps him to see the identicality of the policeman and the terrorist so far as their nature and function in a conventional society are concerned: "The policeman and the terrorist both come from the same basket.

\textsuperscript{40}The Secret Agent, p.309.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., p.69.
Revolution, legality -- countermoves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical."\textsuperscript{42} Oppressed by the lethargy and quietism around him, the Professor evolves an attitude that will enable him to lead a life of absolute sincerity, shorn of all illusions. When Ossipon asks, "What remains?", he replies with determination, "I remain -- if I am strong enough."\textsuperscript{43} He is perfectly aware of the revolutionary goal while others are not. It is for this reason that he does not play at being an anarchist.

One may pick loopholes in the Professor's seemingly invincible logic of destruction. He is too fanatic-ally obsessed with his ideology to put it in critical perspective. His fierce commitment to his ideology loses credibility because it springs, to a great extent, from his failures in the academic and financial spheres. We are told that he began his life as "an assistant demonstrator in chemistry at some technical institute" and greatly struggled to "raise himself in the social scale."\textsuperscript{44} But the society had neither acknowledged nor rewarded his "genius". To see his ambition thwarted opened his eyes "to the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt and blasphemous."\textsuperscript{45} If

\textsuperscript{42}\textit{The Secret Agent}, p.69  
\textsuperscript{43}\textit{Ibid.}, p.304.  
\textsuperscript{44}\textit{Ibid.}, p.75  
\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}, p.81.
his ambitions were not thwarted, his perceptions of the world could have been different. Thus the origins of his radical discontent and the ideology constituted on that edifice put into question his sincerity and integrity. Conrad generalises on the experiences of the Professor to comment on the real sources of most revolutions: "The way even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds." The stature of the Professor reduces considerably in our eyes when Conrad observes:

... in their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking peace in common with the rest of mankind - the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience.\footnote{\textit{The Secret Agent}, p.81.}

The most vocal critic of the Professor is Alexander Ossipon who is scared stiff of the Professor's enthusiasm for destruction. Ossipon is a former medical student who has been drawn to anarchism because it ensures a life of ease and idleness. Like Verloc, he is averse to work and does not want to endanger his safety by participating in any form of decisive action. The repeated emphasis on his 'robustness' emphasises by contrast his love of comfort and ineffectuality and puts into ironic relief his vocation of making a living by sponging off

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}
young women only too happy to associate themselves with a handsome man. His conversation with the Professor in Chapter Four reveals the essential difference between the two men. Ossipon cannot think that a peaceable man like Verloc could make such an audacious attempt as to explode the first meridian. For an anarchist, Ossipon lacks intelligence and perspicacity. He thinks that Verloc's shop is a paying concern and he maintains his family through it. He has never thought as to why Verloc always seems to elude the grasp of police which makes him a terribly sloppy revolutionary.

Ossipon is also single-minded like the Professor, though his single-mindedness consists only in preserving his own self-interest. He is not at all sorry for his comrade Verloc, but anxious about his own future, because "if this affair eventuated in the stoppage of the modest subsidy for the publication of the F.P. pamphlets" he will be in trouble. He is also mortally afraid about the police action as a result of the explosion and his only thought is how to dissociate himself from any supposed complicity with it. "You may take it as you like", he tells the Professor, "but under the circumstances the only policy for the militant revolutionary group is to disclaim all connection with this
damned freak of yours. How to make the disclaimer convincing enough is what bothers me." For the first time in life Ossipon is called upon to take some initiative as opposed to hollow talking and pamphleteering, and he is puzzled. Like Verloc, he is caught unawares by the unpredictable logic of events and lacks the necessary courage and commitment to decide on a definite course of action. The narrator's comment that the "even tenor" of Ossipon's "revolutionary life" was menaced by no fault of his, is replete with irony and emphasises the dichotomy between his proclaimed commitment and the actuality of his life. He can think of no possible way out of his predicament, and the Professor, aware of his pimpish disposition, advises him banteringly to fasten himself to an exploitable woman. Ossipon was, in fact, thinking of Winnie in such a light at that moment, now that she is free (as he wrongly believes), and the Professor's advice startles him.

Ossipon's quietism and the Professor's fanaticism are too extremes of the revolutionary spectrum. If the former is absolutely unworthy of his assumed role because of inaction, the latter is consumed with a passion for action and wants to destroy people's faith in legality and conventional concepts of right and wrong.

49 The Secret Agent, p.77.
50 Ibid., p.78
Ossipon accuses the 'little man' of complicity with Verloc for handing out high explosives to him and thus putting into jeopardy the future of anarchists in England. But the Professor does not have an iota of regard for whatever Ossipon and his comrades have been doing, taking their cue from the Central Red Committee. He does not care for whatever happens to them or him individually. He is a thorough nihilist. The highly charged dialogue sparked off by Ossipon's description of the bomb-throwing incident as 'criminal' shows the essential difference between the two:

"Criminal! What is that? What is crime? What can be the meaning of such an assertion?"

"How am I to express myself? One must use the current words", said Ossipon impatiently.

"... the condemned social order has not been built up on paper and I don't fancy any combination of ink and paper will ever put an end to it.... Yes, I would give the stuff to every man, woman or fool that likes to come along. I would see you all hounded out of here, or arrested -- or beheaded for that matter -- without turning a hair. What happens to us individually is not of the least consequence."\(^{51}\)

Further, though it is the Professor who has been striving hard to evoke 'madness and despair' and create a wholly new social order out of it, it is the ineffectual Ossipon who comes into the presence of real madness and...\(^{51}\)The Secret Agent, pp.71-2.
despair when he meets Winnie after she has killed her husband. The result, far from moving the world, as predicted by the Professor, was merely to drive Winnie, a simple woman, to suicide.

In his letter to Cunningham Graham on Feb. 18, 1899, Conrad makes a clear distinction between the anarchist who wants to destroy the whole fabric of society and the "peace man" who believes that all men are brothers and naively directs all his endeavours for the establishment of fraternity among them. Conrad shows his appreciation for the anarchist position because it is clear and sincere while the other is "impracticable" and "tends to weaken national sentiment." In The Secret Agent, it is only the professor who comes close to the anarchist position articulated above. The other anarchists show a combination of attitudes, running counter to each other and sometimes, in conflict with their professed aim. For example, we have Michaelis who is "a representative anarchist while being in origin part Fenian, part anarchist, and part socialist." Unlike other anarchists in the novel, Michaelis's portrayal is rich with suggestions of innocence and saintliness, a reminder, perhaps, of Prince Kropotkin and his faith in

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52 G.Jean Aubry, Life and Letters I, p.268.
the innate goodness of humanity.

Michaelis is out of prison on ticket-of-leave. In his youth, he got sentenced because of a disinterested act of courage. His participation in a rather crazy attempt to rescue some prisoner from a police van resulted in his getting a life sentence. Though the original scheme was to rescue the prisoners by overpowering the escort, during the scuffle, one of the constables got shot and died, living behind 'a wife and three children'. This accidental death of the policeman aroused a furious outburst of indignation against the rescuers and "a raging, implacable pity for the victim." The popular sentiment, coupled with Michaelis's own sincerity in expressing his feelings, contributed to his getting the life sentence, a punishment out of all proportion with his trivial part in the operation. After his conditional release, by a strange reversal of popular sentiment, he has become a hero, himself a "victim" of police excesses. His public image as a symbol of suffering and his eloquence as a speaker, ensures his popularity with the audience. Ossipon, threatened with the danger of reprisal after the bomb outrage thinks of putting him as a speaker before the public to enlist their sympathy: "I must lay hands on Michaelis at once, and

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54 The Secret Agent, p.106.
get him to speak from his heart at one of our gatherings. The public has a sentimental regard for that fellow."\textsuperscript{55}

In The Secret Agent, Conrad shows how Marxist activities operate in a bourgeois society. In Michaelis, we see how Marxism has left varied impacts on different types of revolutionists. His prison life has brought about significant physical and mental changes in him. From an ordinary locksmith, he is transformed into an apostle:

Nothing that happened to him individually had any importance. He was like those saintly men whose personality is lost in the contemplation of their faith. His ideas were not in the nature of convictions. They were inaccessible to reasoning. They formed in all their contradictions and obscurities an invincible and humanitarian creed ...\textsuperscript{56}

As opposed to Ossipon's pseudo-scientific attitude, Michaelis's convictions are not amenable to reason. He is a simple soul, a benign humanitarian who feels out of place in the anarchist circle of London and seeks his refuge in the drawing room of his Lady Patroness who is profoundly impressed by the "sterling quality of his optimism."\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} The Secret Agent, pp.77-8.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p.107.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
Michaelis is concerned not with the destruction of society but with the rectification of the economic system. Though there is a Marxist flavour to his analysis of capitalism, his views are too simplistic and mystical to be called truly Marxist:

He saw capitalism doomed in its cradle, born with the poison of the principle of competition in its system. The great capitalists devouring the little capitalists, concentrating the power and the tools of production in great masses, perfecting industrial processes, and in the madness of self-aggrandisement only preparing, organising, enriching, making ready the lawful inheritance of the suffering proletariat. 58

His sense of economic determinism predicts a glorious future for the common people. His vision of future is that of a classless society where the strong will devote themselves to the nursing of the weak. Given his theory of inevitable changes that are to take over for a rearrangement of the present order, Michaelis leaves little scope for action for the anarchists. To Ossipon's question about the irrelevance of any concerted effort, Michaelis responds by pointing out the great importance of revolutionary propaganda. The argument is not devoid of his characteristic eloquence:

58 The Secret Agent, p. 49.
'Then it is no use doing anything -- no use whatever'.

'I don't say that', protested Michaelis, gently.... Preparation of the future was necessary! ... he argued that revolutionary propaganda was a delicate work of high conscience. It was the education of the masters of the world. It should be as careful as the education given to the kings.59

However, Michaelis's stature as a thinker and anarchist philosopher is hemmed in by serious disclaimers. We are told that he has lost the power of thinking coherently. With delighted self-absorption, he is writing about his experiences in the prison, his words floating in the air without ever touching reality. His communications with his patroness are like "the efforts at moral intercourse between the inhabitants of remote planets."60 They are touching in their 'foredoomed futility'. Besides, Michaelis is pathetic in his obesity, always associated in Conrad with stupidity and senility. He came out of the prison "round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks"61 as if the government had stuffed him, with a vengeance, with fattening food. His "round and obese body seemed to float low between the chairs."62 By investing Michaelis with such ludicrous features, Conrad ironically undercuts his

59 The Secret Agent, pp.49-50.
60 Ibid., p.108.
61 Ibid., p.53.
62 Ibid.
stature and makes him as ordinary and ineffectual as the other anarchists. The ambiguity in his views is indicative of the confusion that was inherent in the anarchist movement.

Kurl Yundt represents the degeneration of anarchist movement into pure terrorism. He is the most repulsive of the sham revolutionaries. He is "old and bald, with a narrow snow-white wisp of a goatee hanging limply from his chin."\(^6^3\) He aspires for freedom from the tendency to resigned pessimism which, he believes, rots the world. Conrad tells us that Yundt has been a great actor in his time, on public platforms and in secret assemblies, but who has never, surprisingly, put his theories into practice; Yundt has never raised "his little finger against the social edifice."\(^6^4\) Habituated to speak in violent and melodramatic terms, Yundt represents the stereotype of the extreme terrorist of the popular imagination. His description of the branding by red-hot iron and skin burning and sizzling drives Stevie to a state of frenzy. Michaelis's passivity infuriates Yundt. A simulator to the core, he has the peculiar gift of making blood-curdling statements. Like Peter Ivanovitch in *Under Western Eyes*, Yundt suffers from megalomania and a tendency to the melodramatic:

\(^6^3\) *The Secret Agent*, p.42.
'I have always dreamt', he mouthed fiercely, 'of a band of man absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, ... No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity.65

Yundt's idea of a revolutionary is the one unruffled by any scruples of pity or morality to destruction for the restructuring of human society. The pity is that he cannot get even "three such men together."66 Yundt's oral violence is at variance with his physical degeneration. He is a 'moribund murderer' with 'worn out' passions. His shivering hands, toothless gums, perched throat and gouty swellings point to his utter senility.

In the scheme of the novel, Yundt reinforces, along with Michaelis and Ossipon, the futility and ineffectuality of anarchism.

In The Secret Agent, Conrad's political insight extends into the internal workings of the statecraft. His treatment of the home-secretary Sir Ethelred, though slightly pompous, is realistic enough and is based on the biography of Sir William Harcourt. Sir Ethelred's impatience with details and insistence on lucidity is characteristic of the simplification resorted to in

65 The Secret Agent, p.42.
66 Ibid., p.43.
day-do-day politics. He is not concerned with the legitimacy of means or the process of an enquiry, but with its final results only. A typical political figure, he considers each new step to be a revolutionary one. For the present, he has concentrated all his energies on the nationalisation of fisheries. His liaison with the underworld is maintained through Inspector Heat who keeps him informed about anarchist activities. Heat reassured Sir Ethelred only a few days ago that all the anarchists are accounted for and that there is no danger of any outrage from them. Quite reasonably 'the great personage' is incensed by the bomb-throwing incident. Nevertheless, he is not interested in the details of such a sordid affair but simply wants the problem solved. The parody of this political figure matches the parody of the anarchists.

Chief Inspector Heat is the principal expert in anarchist procedure. He is a competent police officer, pragmatic and unimaginative. He is perfectly aware of the delicacy and difficulty involved in his job: "A given anarchist may be watched inch by inch and minute by minute, but a moment always comes when somehow all sight and touch of him are lost for a few hours, during which something (generally an explosion) more or less
He prefers burglars whom he can understand and deal with to the anarchists whose rejection of all legality and norms seems to him sheer lunacy. His answer as to how to come to grip with the phenomenon, if he is allowed to do so, is straightforward but simplistic and brutal: "Terrorists ought to be shot at sight like mad dogs." Heat and his superiors believe in the essential justice of democratic political institutions and their concern is to protect and preserve them. The Home Secretary and the Assistant Commissioner recognise that there is social injustice and believe that these institutions will help in the gradual amelioration of the social iniquities. Of course, their actions contribute little towards the achievement of this goal. Sir Ethelred is obsessed with his own revolution (nationalisation of fisheries) and the Assistant Commissioner is permanently worried by his wife's banality and petty jealousies. They have nothing substantial to offer against the insanity and despair of the political world of The Secret Agent.

The bureaucracy and the police in The Secret Agent cannot operate without taking recourse to underhand methods. Heat's effectiveness depends on the secret

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67 The Secret Agent, p.85.
68 Ibid., p.95.
agent Verloc who sells him information. The Assistant Commissioner's observation that "the reputation of Chief Inspector Heat might possibly have been made in a great part by the secret agent Verloc" is perspicuous. The police and the secret agent are mutually sustaining. Verloc's information helps Heat to keep a firm grip on the situation and pre-empt any move by the anarchists. In return, Heat extends Verloc the much-needed police protection so that he can operate freely. This paradox of order fails when Verloc commits the bomb outrage. He could not possibly inform Heat about a plot of which he himself is the real architect. As Heat comes to know the real story, he is much worried about the problems that would be raised by Verloc's inevitable arrest and the attendant exposure of their secret liaison. Not only that a useful source of information is permanently lost, but Heat would be hard put to defend himself in the face of adverse publicity. Hence his 'unofficial' advice to Verloc to clear out. He could disappear easily because people think that it was Verloc who was killed at Greenwich.

The Secret Agent is a searching scrutiny of the fissures not only in political institutions, but in the social and domestic spheres as well. In it Conrad

69The Secret Agent, p.143.
undertakes to explore some of the bleak and disturbing aspects of life ashore, setting his locale right in the centre of civilisation -- the urban England. Conrad seems to suggest that like Congo, London is another heart of darkness eventhough it has all pretentious claim to civilisation and progress. The London of the novel is essentially Dickensian in its shabbiness, vulgarity and social injustice. Mrs. Neale, the charwoman, Winnie Verloc, Stevie and their mother and the cab-driver illustrate the murky social iniquities in different ways. Like the sub-human denizens of the 'vile den' in Under Western Eyes, Mrs. Neale is a symbol of the dehumanisation of human form in The Secret Agent. During the cab-ride when Stevie asks the cab driver not to whip the horses because, "it hurts", the cabby explains that he must treat his horse cruelly in order to provide his family, his "missus and four kids at 'ome" with bread. Stevie is so much disturbed that the declaration "seemed to strike the world dumb." His compressed response represents the reaction of men with clear-sighted vision and sympathy to much of the social and other injustices in the novel:

... he came to a stop with an angry splutter: "Shame!" Stevie was no master of

70 The Secret Agent, p.157.
71 Ibid., p.166.
72 Ibid., p.167.
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phrases.... But he felt with greater completeness and some profundity.\textsuperscript{73} Stevie utters the simple truth, - "Bad world for poor people."\textsuperscript{74} But the simple statement conceals a profound reality. The professed anarchists who should have attacked this reality are governed by megalomania and expediency. It falls upon the shôlder of the existenti-alist 'outsider' and 'crippled' Stevie to provide the narrative with some kind of moral lever.

Conrad lashes at the bourgeois pretension to civilisation and culture. He puts into Vladimir's mouth a question almost devastating in its implication when he makes him ask, "I suppose you agree that the middle class are stupid?"\textsuperscript{75} and when Verloc replies, "They are," we are left with no doubt that Conrad necessarily shares the opinion of the two men. The middle class, with their elaborate paraphernalia of police and civil administration allow the social iniquities to perpetuate. Conrad reveals the contradiction inherent in the attitude of the upper classes through the lesson Winnie teaches Stevie when he asks her to explain the function of the police: "They are there so that them as have nothing should not take anything from them who have."\textsuperscript{76} Quite reasonably, Stevie asks the moot question of the

\textsuperscript{73} The Secret Agent, p.167.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p.171.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.29.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p.173.
revolutionary; "What? ... Not even if they were hung-ry? Mustn't they?"\(^77\) and Winnie answers, "Not if they were ever so."\(^78\) This is the kind of rock-bottom justice that Conrad explodes in his analysis of the English society.

The socio-political and cultural vision presented in the novel is essentially bleak and depressing. This is due to the total lack of any sincere commitment to social justice on the part of any character except Stevie. Conrad clearly articulates the corruption and utter hollowness of some of the seemingly civilised values that are taken for granted in the Western society. At the same time, he shows the inadequacy of the revolutionary action that is called for to destroy these values. He is as harsh towards revolutionaries as he is towards governmental institutions both of which he dismisses with the cynical disillusionment of an artist confronted with the dismal state of affairs in the contemporary world. At the end we are left with only 'madness and despair'.

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\(^77\) The Secret Agent, p.173.
\(^78\) Ibid.