

By Lawrence Kramer

THIS IS AN EXCITING TIME for "progressive" economists. Many issues they've been talking about—defense spending, worker ownership and plant closings, national planning, the feminization of poverty, Third World underdevelopment—are starting to appear in mainstream political debate. And with each passing month, both far right and liberal economic prescriptions wear thinner. Does this mean that it's time at last for the left to cash in its chips?

Ann Beaudry, formerly at the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies, thinks the time is right, that it demands an heroic effort to build a new consensus. She and others organized a recent "summit" of leaders from citizen action and public interest groups, government, academia and labor. The result? According to David Gordon of New York's Center for Democratic Alternatives, "We're close to a flagpole document, but not yet there."

The Progressive Leadership Conference on America's Economic Future was preceded by a series of regional meetings involving 60 left economists and policy analysts. Of course, a conference cannot consolidate a diverse movement. But the hope for an alternative agenda brought 225 people to Washington, D.C. in mid-January.

In their conference packet was a work in progress, intended to become a platform of popular consumption. But "Toward a New Economic Agenda for America's Future," written by economist Richard Parker, wasn't debated or adopted. Why not?

Faced with an ambitious goal, the talk was mostly about smaller issues. A pioneering conference devoted to risky explorations often drifted back to familiar shores. Among the obstacles: too much attention was paid to how badly the current system is functioning; too little attention was given to basic questions about how to reach people. Finally, politeness and a fragile optimism seemed to prevent a real airing of the unresolved questions and disagreements that are the substance of developing a set of attractive ideas, convincing programs and workable strategies.

The solace of the merciless critique.

Very often, at this conference called to develop alternatives, describing problems substituted for thinking about them. Of course, vast areas of domestic devastation and terrifying international dangers urgently demand our attention and anger. And, faced with the possibility of a second Reagan term, our immediate prospects are bleak. We feel schizophrenic—

PERSPECTIVES

Economic future of U.S. explored

despite all we know, we are unable to change much. Piling on the detail about the nature and consequences of present policies provides some satisfaction—that way, at least, it feels like we're attacking the issues.

That's not to say we don't need information. Progress on an alternative vision calls for new ways of looking at what we're up against. The second major conference paper, "The Economic State of the Union 1984: Uneven Recovery—Uncertain Future," by Massachusetts economists Barry Bluestone, Bennett Harrison and Lucy Gorham, analyzed our current uneven, inadequate and inequitable recovery. Leslie Nulty of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union showed us why American industrial workers shouldn't take the fall for our economy's problems: "The left shouldn't be defensive about high wages for U.S. workers—they're good for the economy. The glory days of the '50s and '60s were built on rising real wages for the U.S. working class." But such work, while valuable, doesn't negate the need to develop alternatives.

Asking the right questions.

In no other capitalist nation are the judgments and predictions of the left so peripheral. We may often joke that liberals rely on the left for their ideas, but these days you wouldn't know it. Perhaps, as University of California Regent Stanley Sheinbaum pointed out, that's because "the liberals have lost their spine." We've elected some progressives, and we've established outposts in neighborhoods, unions and schools—but we lack influential powerbrokers and, for the most part, highly visible spokespeople. Most Americans rarely hear our views, except when we're able to find a sympathetic reporter.

Given the uneven matchup in power and resources, our problem is not a failure to do our homework on theories and facts. Our difficulty is more basic: getting more people to understand and accept our ideas. At the Washington meeting, the question "How can we reach people?" was addressed with useful tips about PR, organizing or electoral cam-

paigns—or with advice about being pragmatic.

Yet the difficulty isn't technical. The trouble is connecting a left analysis to our fellow citizens' everyday thinking and anti-ideological tendencies. As Gar Alperovitz of the National Center for Economic Alternatives noted, "We've made extraordinary growth in the last 10 years in our ability to flesh out a program and organize around it. But it won't go anywhere unless...it engenders and is rooted in community values of renewal and fairness."

Pride and policy.

At the conference, Derek Shearer described how efforts in California have resulted in "progress in demystifying money and the investment process, and increased the number of players," and Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower saw in local Sunbelt victories underground signs that "we're doing more than you think, and moving more than you think."

But when does justifiable satisfaction become arrogance? The aggressive impulse is generally healthy—after all, we do want to win! And the call of Hulbert James of HumanSERVE "to fight for what we believe" was inspiring. But pride can become belligerent impatience—perhaps a hangover from some organizers' conflicts with left sectarians in the early '70s.

Of course, it's frustrating to fight so hard for pale and unexciting imitations of full-fledged socialism. It's tempting instead to charge forward. Yet the Washington meeting did not discuss how to do that in a way that makes sense to those we seek to organize. When people on the left insist that we "call things by their right names," are we paying more attention to our own need to be sure we're radicals than to our desire for effective political programs? Is it arrogant or realistic to say the left can try to set the terms for debate—for instance, on these issues:

- Mainstream economists keep raising the ceiling for "true" full employment. These days, those who most fear inflation, and those who think many women or minorities don't need jobs as much as white men, peg it at unemployment levels of 6 percent or higher. Recently, Harvard economist Otto Eckstein broke that consensus, saying we could have 4 percent unemployment. If we believe even that is too high, should progressives be calling for 2 percent or less—along with price controls?

- What about fighting for more than "just jobs": for improved quality of work and a shorter work week?

- Then there's the evolving debate on industrial policy, under attack from the right as disguised socialist central planning. How can we help shape the emerging program while maintaining our critique about how the powerful and the powerless will be represented in the decisions made under industrial policy?

What is to be decided?

Under a veneer of confidence and expertise, a high level of uncertainty about the future—about what strategy makes sense—was apparent. Though we may be close to agreement on a general economic program, many critical questions raised by economists at the conference remain unresolved:

- What do we say about subjects on which we don't have fully developed positions? David Gordon's list of areas where we're still trying to come up with

answers included the deficit, price controls, tax reform and control of banking. Jeff Faux of the Project on Industrial Policy & Democracy would add how to implement democratic planning to that list: "The truth is, we don't know how to do it."

- What about industrial policy? The *New Republic's* Bob Kuttner pointed out that it could lead to increased unemployment, if not done democratically and if it doesn't affect the distribution of productivity. Michigan economist Ernest Wilson warned that this technocratic policy can become a tool that defines the issue. James Galbraith of the Congressional Joint Economic Committee doubted a government agency could force major corporations to do what they weren't going to do anyway, and was skeptical about controlling credit and picking winners. Randy Barber of the Center for Economic Organizing pointed to the difficulty of campaigning for an abstract issue that must be demonstrated to be understood. Others found the issue itself "boring and unsexy."

- What to do about the looming elections? David Gordon said a big effort for 1984 would be fooling ourselves and wasting time, and urged shooting for an impact on 1986 congressional races. But Robert Borosage of the Institute for Policy Studies insisted we have to band together and stop reaction—defeat Reagan, work for any Democratic nominee—or spend the rest of our political lives trying to undo the damage. Many strategists hope the Jesse Jackson campaign becomes a lightning rod for left issues. And they recognized that electoral success by a disarmament movement, seeking to free what Gordon Adams of the Defense Budget Project of Washington's Center on Budget and Policy Priorities called "an economy held hostage to the military budget," might lay the groundwork for the success of an alternative economic program.

Even if we reach consensus on all these issues, still others can't be neatly resolved. Michael Harrington of the Democratic Socialists of America pointed out that the left, to be effective, needs to learn to live with ambiguity, disagreement and unresolved issues. According to Harrington, we can disagree with the AFL-CIO on Latin America and work with them on taxes and education; we can agree with the Catholic Church on nuclear disarmament and economics while disagreeing on abortion: "We have to find a way to march with them on Monday and fight on Tuesday so we can march together again on Wednesday."

The themes and ideas raised at this conference deserve wide distribution. Perhaps by the next one, we'll have some evidence of what works. And we'll keep in mind the definition of our job provided by Judy Gregory from Cleveland 925: "Ninety-eight percent of Americans can't hear our discussion; they believe the shibboleths that Americans have asked too much and live too well. The key to politically effective social change is to talk to people so they can hear us."

The following conference materials are available to In These Times readers:

- "The Economic State of the Union" and "Toward a New Economic Agenda" from the Economic Education Project, Public Media Center, 25 Scotland St., San Francisco, CA 94133.

- "Our Jobs, Our Future: Questions for the Candidates about America's Industry and Economy" from the Project on Industrial Policy & Democracy, 2000 P St., NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20036. \$5.00.

- "The Wage Investment and the Union Role in the Management Agreement at Eastern Airlines" from the Center for Economic Organizing, 1346 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 1010, Washington, DC 20036.

- "The Recovery and Full Employment Planning Act" from Rep. John Conyers, Rayburn Building, Room 2313, Washington, DC 20515.

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INPRINT

FICTION

The Devil's Stocking
By Nelson Algren
Arbor House, 308 pp., \$8.95

Chicago: City on the Make
By Nelson Algren
McGraw Hill, 106 pp., \$5.95

By Bettina Drew

Though mostly forgotten now by academics and others in the literary establishment whose taste is for a less brutal, less hard-hitting prose, Nelson Algren was a novelist who depicted the dark underside of the American dream. Best known for his novels *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949) and *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1956), Algren created characters from the depths of city life: small-time boxers, burglars, pimps and whores.

He once said that he wrote out of "a kind of irritability that the people on top should be so contented, so absolutely unaware of these other people, and so sure that their values are the right ones. There's a certain satisfaction in recording the people underneath, whose values are as sound as theirs, and a lot funnier, and a lot truer, in a way."

Now, two years after his death, his last novel *The Devil's Stocking* has been published, and his famous prose poem *Chicago: City on the Make* has been re-issued more than 30 years after its original publication.

Unlike his previous novels, *The Devil's Stocking* is based on a true story, that of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a nationally known boxer who was convicted in 1966 for shooting three people to death in a white bar in Paterson, N.J. A former black militant in a racially tense town, Carter has always insisted he was framed by police. He was convicted largely on testimony given by two small-time burglars who had been promised a deal by the district attorney. Nine years later the discovery of suppressed evidence concerning the reliability of these witnesses caused the Supreme Court to throw out the first conviction.

By this time the case had become a *cause celebre* championed by such luminaries as Bob Dylan, who wrote a song about the case called "Hurricane." Carter was re-convicted in a second trial, but under equally dubious circumstances: the witnesses now changed their stories again to say that they had not lied at the first trial, and defense lawyers claimed that police had planted evidence in Carter's car after he was picked up for questioning.

Along with other leftists and liberals, Algren considered Carter's conviction a serious miscarriage of justice. He became obsessed with the case after writing a magazine article about it. He moved to Paterson to be near the locale where the novel would take place, a strategy of on-the-spot recording he had used successfully in previous novels.

But while *The Devil's Stocking* follows the basic story of Carter pretty faithfully, it is nonetheless fiction. Algren changed the names, added and took out characters and did not mention evidence like the bullets found in Carter's car after the shooting.

The novel is vintage Algren, written with his ear for succinct dialog and in the same direct prose in short paragraphs that seems much simpler than it is. The story begins with Ruby Calhoun (Carter) going into the ring and then it flashes back to his childhood, his angry father, his early career as a mugger and shoplifter before he got into boxing. It is fully one quarter through the novel before Algren recounts the killings, and by this time the characters have been firmly established.

Much of the beauty in the book lies in its powerful portrayal of supporting characters. Red, the real murderer, is shadowy and unpredictable. A mulatto who can "pass," he is unsure of his identity. His girlfriend, Dovie



Record-keeper of urban life

Jean Dawkins, is from a large black family where she never got much individual attention, and she doesn't seem to mind becoming a whore and stripper when they leave New Jersey because she can then be the sole recipient of his love. Iello, the petty thief who fingers Calhoun, is helpless and pathetic. Manipulated by police and ultimately by Calhoun's scorned mistress, he does what he's told to pull the least time in prison. These people are not fighters like Ruby Calhoun, and they seem to fall into violence almost unintentionally, as if they are not in control of what happens to them.

Through detailed descriptions of their lives and work, Algren reveals the day-to-day reality of the underworld. The whorehouse where Dovie Jean works is explored through his relentless eyes: the heavily draped rooms and the scantily clad women, the boredom, the apathetic faces of the hookers when a john is choosing among them, the big dumb bouncers. Ruby Calhoun, like the hero of Algren's first successful novel *Never Come Morning*, is a "fighting man." Boxing is used by Algren as a metaphor for class struggle—a way for

poor, spirited, politically powerless people to make a living.

The entire novel is about struggle—not only for justice but for life and hope and freedom from violence and jail. *The Devil's Stocking* is about how vengeance, survival, love and convenience add up to what the American legal system calls "justice." In Algren's fictional world, it is jealousy that undermines the testimony of the second trial. But it wouldn't have really mattered by whom or under what circumstances justice was abandoned. Any human frailty or emotion could have caused it. It is a world where justice is lost to personal gain.

His kind of town.

Chicago: City on the Make is not a novel at all but a prose poem that presents the history of Chicago from its frontier days to the '50s. When first published in 1951, it was unfavorably received in its home town. One reviewer wrote that "a more partial, distorted, unenviable slant was never taken by a man pretending to cover the Chicago scene." The essay's premise is that the heart of the city beats in its slums. It's written in a slangy, word-packed



Nelson Algren (left) wrote a prose poem about the history of Chicago (above, in 1890).

prose, with a slightly rambling and somewhat unstructured form that allows Algren's acerbic and wide-ranging social commentary lots of freedom.

It's a two-sided city, a city of poor folks and the squares who drive out to the suburbs "where the houses are pictures from *Town and Country*. And the people are stuffed with kapok." The essay is permeated with a nostalgia for the vigor of Chicago's cultural past that was being eclipsed by the coming of the McCarthy era and the complacency of the '50s.

It was the popularity of Jean Paul Sartre's translation in Europe that prompted rediscovery in the U.S. years later. Included in the present McGraw-Hill re-issue is an afterword written by Algren in 1961. He lashes out at the censorship and self-hatred Chicago imposed upon itself by refusing to accept his less-than-genteel portrait of the city as a legitimate and respectable part of its culture.

But in addition to launching an angry response to critics, Algren discusses literature in general and his place in it. He asserts that literature is made whenever "a challenge is put to the legal apparatus by conscience in touch with humanity," and he places himself firmly within the anti-legalistic tradition of Chicago writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Richard Wright and James T. Farrell.

Of American society and its literature, he writes that consumer-

ism had become so pervasive that "the economically empowered became the emotionally hollowed. This would account for the fact that every enduring portrait in American fiction is that of a man or woman outside the upper-middle class. From Ahab to Ethan Frome and Willy Loman, Hawthorne's branded woman to Blanche du Bois, all are people who, living without alternatives, are forced to live life all the way."

Algren's view of people fighting to overcome the tyranny of the social order brought him into contact with left intellectuals like Sartre, and he had a much-publicized love affair with Simone de Beauvoir. He was reticent toward the American literary scene, but was accepted during his lifetime as a brilliant, if unusual writer. He won a National Book Award for *The Man with the Golden Arm* and was eventually elected to the National Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters.

Algren remained productive throughout his life, finishing *The Devil's Stocking* two years before his death at 72. He never made much money from his writing, nor did he expect to. He was more content to be an important record-keeper of 20th-century urban American life. What he said about *The Devil's Stocking* applies to his other works as well: "I've tried to write about a man's struggle against injustice. That's the only story worth telling." ■

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