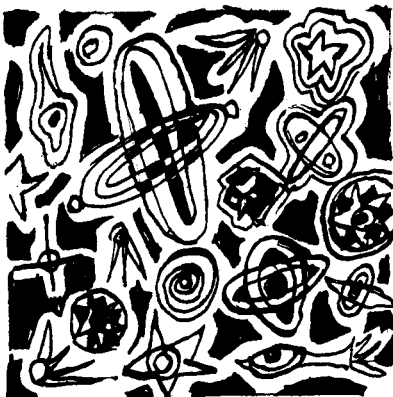


**WILLIAM A. WILLIAMS**



MY COMMENTS ON the subject of this symposium proceed from two propositions:

1. The Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union have been the opium of American Socialism for 45 years.

2. The possession of thermonuclear weapons by the United States and Russia has created an environment—what Marx might have called a balance in the relations of production—which makes it possible for American socialists to kick the monkey and proceed with the honorable and healthy labor of being socialists.

Granting the exceptions, it nevertheless remains basically true that, of all segments of society in the United States, it was American socialists who made between 1890 and 1917 the most relevant and mature adaptation to the end of the frontier. This was a great and courageous achievement. It has never been fully understood or properly appreciated, even by latter-day socialist intellectuals. Among other things, it casts a great deal of very revealing light on the intellectual quality of Marx's analysis of capitalism, upon the validity of his projections and prophecies, and upon his fundamental humanism. Despite the seeming irrelevance of such an effort to the formal subject of this discussion, those considerations are worth brief examination.

The first point is that Marx grasped and understood the underlying validity of what we in the United States call the frontier thesis long before it was advanced by Frederick Jackson Turner, Brooks Adams, and other American intellectuals. (It is not at all improbable, indeed, that Adams got the essence of the idea from Marx.) Marx realized and explicitly explained that it was foolish to look for, or expect, an American socialism to develop until the first, rough capitalistic conquest of the continent had been completed. The frontier in America provided the kind of expansion that capitalism depended upon, and with which it functioned tolerably well.

The second point is directly related: Marx also understood that the frontier operated in political and social affairs exactly as Turner once admitted. It provided "a gate of escape" from the demands and the self-disciplines of living with other human beings in a truly responsible, humane fashion. The creative approach to life could not even begin, Marx repeatedly explained, until people stopped running away from the human condition.

Finally, Marx argued that socialism offered the most relevant and the most humane approach for coming to terms with the end of the frontier, and for proceeding to organize the society of advanced industrialism. It may be admitted, at this point in history, that the prophecy or article of faith has to be left moot. No nation has yet established what Marx called a socialistic society. But the issue is no more than moot—neither the argument nor the prophecy has ever been disproved. In the United States, the so-called Vital Center—meaning a coalition of reformers and enlightened conservatives—has for some 75 years attempted to find or create a new frontier in overseas economic expansion, or in the Keynesian accumulation of capital from the taxpayer to sustain the corporation, or in a combination of both approaches. The results do not disprove Marx. They only disprove Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Between 1899 and 1917, on the other hand, American socialists acted on the assumption that Marx was correct. The results were certainly encouraging, if admittedly not conclusive, and they evoked a significant response from the American people. Three issues and events disrupted that effort. First, the split among socialists over whether they should support American involvement in World War I. Second, the similar but far more devastating argument about the meaning and significance of the Bolshevik Revolution. And third, the generally discounted (or certainly underestimated) campaign of direct and indirect suppression initiated and carried on by the Wilson Administration.

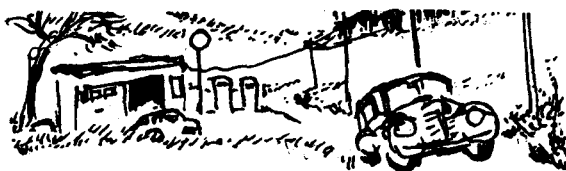
THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE FACTORS was the Bolshevik Revolution. For what the great majority of American socialists did, either immediately or gradually, and either consciously or *à la Freud*, was to respond to the Bolshevik Revolution by giving up Marx in favor of their own curious version of the frontier thesis.

Let us examine this development with the aid of the paradox so beautifully perceived and defined by Roland Van Zandt in his sadly neglected book on *The Metaphysical Foundations of American History*. Van Zandt's central point is that the traditional or Jeffersonian concept of democracy and prosperity defined the good society and the good life as being dependent upon conditions that, even as early as the 1790s, were steadily and ever more rapidly becoming non-existent in the actual or real United States. Hence Jefferson and his followers became expansionists in an effort to recreate conditions appropriate to their beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Even with such expansion,

however, the American ideology and tradition continued to grow increasingly irrelevant.

It thus became progressively more un-American to think and act as a realist. This explains why American socialists were so desperately attacked by the Wilson Administration. The socialist definition of reality became dramatically and dangerously un-American because it exposed the double standard of the traditionally American ideology. The socialists demanded that Americans of the New Nationalism and the New Freedom either continue to act on their avowed pluralism in a society and a world no longer favored by the frontier "gate of escape," or else confess their disbelief in pluralism.

This was a brilliant, courageous, and eminently fair demand. It still is. The tragedy developed as American socialists became ever more American in the traditional sense. This process began the moment American socialists defined the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union as their own new frontier. None of this is said in supercilious or petulant anger. Tragedy is defined by the confrontation and clash of two or more opposed truths. And there was a truth in the emphasis placed on the Bolshevik Revolution by American socialists. It was also a deeply human reaction, particularly in the context of their own tribulations over supporting the war, and the repressions of the Wilson Administration.



All that granted, it nevertheless remains true that the act involved an abandonment of Marx in favor of the frontier thesis. For what the frontier thesis did—either in the Jeffersonian or other versions—was to externalize good. Put another way, the frontier thesis asserted a chain of logic and causation in which desirable and moral results at home became a dependent variable of external factors or conditions. But in externalizing good the frontier thesis as a logical and psychological corollary also externalized evil.

Now this is precisely what American socialists did in connection with the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union. The specific percentages and their chronological evolution can no doubt be debated *ad infinitum*. Broadly speaking, however, American socialists started out by externalizing good in the revolution. Then they proceed to reverse the process. And by the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 they had externalized evil in the Soviet Union.

<sup>1</sup> Van Zandt's most serious error is in limiting the tradition to Jefferson—at least in his presentation. It was shared by all the Founding Fathers.

The result was a redefinition of American socialism as a dependent variable of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union. In order to protect its very existence, American socialism had as a consequence to invest an increasing proportion of its intellectual and moral and psychological energy in attacking Russia. It quite naturally and logically became less socialist and more American.

Now it is quite true that Marx was a moral man. And it can be argued from that axiomatic fact that socialists had to damn the Soviet Union in order to remain socialists. Let the proposition be admitted. But moral condemnation neither means nor of itself leads to a definition of moral existence in terms of the damned. That result flows either from the Freudian principle and dynamic of the obsession, or from the logic of the frontier thesis in externalizing good and evil. Indeed, the frontier thesis considered as a phenomenon of intellectual history may offer a classic case in which the analytical approaches of Freud and Marx can be merged to reinforce each other and to produce a truly profound interpretation of reality.

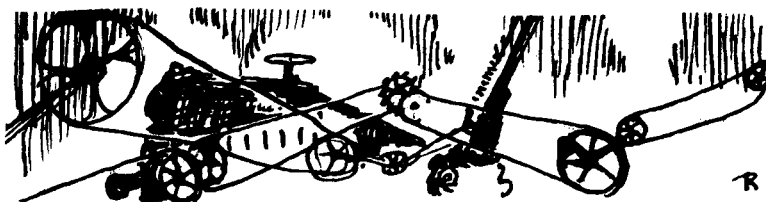
IT ALSO CAN BE ASSERTED, of course, that Marx's emphasis on the internationalism of the labor and socialist movements either produced or demanded the damnation of the Soviet Union. The only weakness of that asseveration is that Marx never defined internationalism in that fashion. He waved the banners of brotherhood, sympathy, and assistance. He did not demand suicide in the name of socialism. But this is very close to what a good many American socialists began offering as Marxist advice, first in 1939, and then ever more vehemently after 1944.

This was superficially persuasive so long as America enjoyed an absolute (or significant relative) superiority in nuclear power. But it was unadulterated frontier thesis rather than sophisticated Marxism. It externalized evil in the frontier of Russia and argued—exactly in keeping with, George Frost Kennan's policy of containment—that all would be well once the frontier was civilized through the application of American power. Remember that Kennan admitted that liberation was merely “the other side of the coin” of containment. Along with a few other aristocrats, Henry L. Stimson was in this situation both more moral and more of a Marxist than such American socialists. For, while holding fast to the reforming mission inherent in the frontier thesis, he at least recognized the catastrophic results of thinking of the atom bomb as no more than an updated six-shooter.

Hence it seems to me that, dangerous and awesome as it is, the existence of thermonuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union offers American socialists another chance. Since in effect the frontier of American socialism has become a nuclear power, and has begun to generate its own reforms, they can gracefully abandon the frontier thesis on the grounds that it is no longer moral or practical. It evades the fundamental issues and it serves

in action to strengthen the more reactionary elements. They can thus cease externalizing evil as located in the Soviet Union, and externalizing good in the form of forcing changes upon the Russians. There is, and always has been, good *and* evil in the United States, in the Soviet Union, in Nigeria, in Cuba, and on down the list. The proper emphasis for socialists is to concentrate on creating more good, not on labeling, classifying, and decrying all the evil. The latter job belongs to the theologians, and American socialists should stop moonlighting.

There is a considerable difference involved between being a socialist as critic and being a socialist as innovator. Both are necessary, but American socialists have been the former far too narrowly and persistently in the years since 1932. One of the benefits of giving up the frontier thesis is the psychological one of creating a need and a demand for fundamentally different alternatives. And certainly the United States needs to be bombarded from within by a barrage of such creative proposals.



IT SEEMS VERY PROBABLY TRUE, as a good many 19th century conservatives argue, that Keynesian political economy gradually creates what they call socialism. But it is not socialism. It is instead a kind of mesmerizing corporate capitalism which cannot truly be said even to caricature socialism. This corporate capitalism is what the New Deal and Fair Deal have produced, and what the New Frontier proposes to maintain and even consolidate. It seems to me time to say this *as socialists* rather than saying it as a tactic of good-hearted men interested in keeping the improvements that have come as part of this rationalization of modern capitalism. It is time for American socialists to stop worrying about liberalism, and periodically wringing their hands over it, and instead to seize this opportunity and exploit all its potential opportunities.

The obvious place to begin is with a stepped-up campaign to focus all the active and latent resistance to America's thermonuclear policy. There is a refreshing and profoundly hopeful significance, as well as a bedrock intelligence, in the average citizen's negative reaction to all the official nonsense about winning a thermonuclear war. That response should be welcomed and respected and supported. But that is only a start. It is crucial for socialists to realize and admit that any real damping down of tension with Russia will turn the spotlight on domestic affairs.

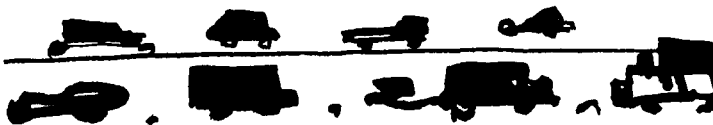
That means that American socialists will have to be prepared for two things. First: an increase in attacks from those who still think in terms of the frontier thesis, and who will therefore explain the frustration of co-existence in terms of domestic radicals. Secondly, it means that American socialists will have to be prepared to offer concrete proposals for improving life in the United States, and in the fundamental character of its overseas aid programs. These proposals will have to be capable of standing on their own merits. They will no longer be able to rely on the logic of Cold War necessity.

Furthermore, and most vital of all, these proposals will have to be socialist. They cannot to any point be warmed over palliatives snatched from the medicine cabinets of Populism, Progressivism, or New Dealism. It seems to me that they will have to be based on three essential propositions: decentralization, the quality of material and human production instead of its quantity, and the substance and tone of human relationships. Socialists in the United States have for too long whored after the capitalist mistress efficiency. But Marx was not talking about being better capitalists, he was talking about being something drastically different—about being socialists.

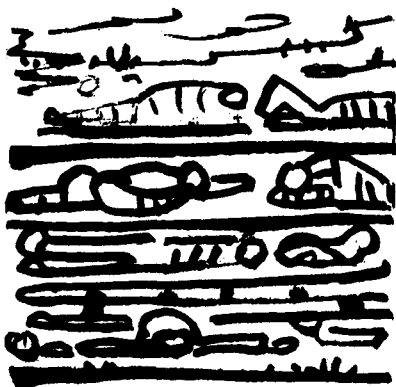
These demands are not unfair. They are the classic tests for any viable movement in the political marketplace. So far, to put it bluntly, American socialism since 1917 has flunked the course. To change the metaphor, the contemporary existence of a thermonuclear stalemate represents the third strike that American socialism has coming to it by the rules of the game. It finds itself in a situation very similar to the predicament of Roy Hobbs, the protagonist in Bernard Malamud's allegoric novel, *The Natural*. In the crucial game, and though he had already compromised himself, Roy wanted desperately to get a pennant-winning hit. But he had so long defined baseball as something else that he failed in the clutch.

American socialism is in many ways a natural, too. It could by all expectations produce an exciting and creative commonwealth with the material and human resources at hand. But it will never do so as long as it defines socialism as something else. To put the socialism back into American socialism seems to me to be both the need and the opportunity posed by the advent of thermonuclear weapons.

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*Democratic Socialism  
must reaffirm its  
principles in a modern  
Stuttgart Program*



## MULFORD SIBLEY

DESPITE THE FACT THAT it is perhaps the most important issue of the day, it remains true that there is no "socialist" position on the problem of thermo-nuclear war. Instead, there are positions held by various socialists, some of which would appear to be mutually contradictory. How does this happen, we might ask, and what are some of the considerations which should enter into the formulation of a socialist attitude?

### 1.

The problem of a socialist view of war has been with us a long time and there are both parallels and differences between, for example, the classical days of socialism just before World War I and the issue as we confront it today.

Until the early part of the twentieth century, there was only a hazily formulated socialist attitude to war. International congresses were primarily concerned with such questions as internal tactics, relation of socialist activity to trade unions, and the place of the co-operative movement in socialist plans. Looking back on those days from the perspective of two World Wars and the dread possibility of a third, it is hard to believe that it was not until the Stuttgart Congress of The Second International (1907) that the question of war was seriously discussed. Confronted by an accelerated arms race between Britain and Germany, the tenuous "balance of power" situation, and other similarly alarming phenomena, far-seeing members of the International came to the conclusion that there was a real likelihood that the long international "peace" might be brought to an end. G.D.H. Cole (*History of Socialist Thought*, v. III, p. 61) has put well the issue which confronted them:

The Socialists had to make up their minds whether their declared hostility to the capitalist States was so deep as to absolve them from all obligations to defend their national territories if they were attacked, or whether they recognized an obligation of national defense as transcending their opposition to the Governments under whose auspices it would in practice need to be conducted. They had to make up their minds whether they were prepared to co-operate with bourgeois pacifists in attempts to prevent war . . . and whether they should be prepared to assign degrees of guilt to the rival imperialist powers in the event of a threatened or actual conflict.