

Are Liberal Socialists The Captives of Democracy?

IN A RECENT ISSUE of *New Politics*, Max Nomad has doubted that there has ever been a "socialism from below," of the "masses." His article will probably provoke a storm of emotional defense of the principles of democracy and pure tolerance, for socialists in the western world are still unwilling to reconsider the universal timeless validity of those sacred principles. Many liberal socialists are even psychologically unable to read the brilliant criticisms of contemporary democracy made by men like Ortega y Gasset and Herbert Marcuse. Although socialist liberals have often ridiculed Communist formulas like the "people's anti-monopoly coalition" and the standard lead sentence "Masses and masses of people are banding together against . . .", they still share the basic populist orientation of Western Communists. They consider the immediate judgment of the "masses" to be the foremost criterion of serious radical politics.

This is a curious and depressing phenomenon because the populace, especially the proletariat, has grown increasingly contemptuous of radical intellectuals and has fallen further each year under the spell of mass entertainment industries controlled by the giant corporations. Confronted by basic political issues like the war in Vietnam, the populace assumes a defensive mask of emotional clichés and vulgar democratic arrogance. It demands that we must "Support Our Boys," a posture which protects it from rational discourse with intellectuals. In this hermetic attitude the population would "rather fight than think." On important political issues, to "switch" would involve mental effort, pain, and risk, especially for those ill prepared for mental effort and pampered into democratic smugness by the mass media.

The instinct to "fight" is healthy only when one knows his *real* enemies. Here lies the strangest paradox of "pop" socialism, for although fifty years ago the poor masses knew that their real enemies were the wealthy classes, now the populace is rather thoroughly persuaded that its enemies are the "eggheads" and collegiate non-conformists who parade against Johnson's war policy. The enemy is no longer the rich and powerful, but the intelligent and outspoken.

The dogged persistence of socialists who devote most of their activity to a pursuit of the masses would not be a neurotic compulsion if they had direct avenues to the populace, avenues as promising as the mass communications media. But these media and their profit-seeking sponsors have a near monopoly on direct communication with the people and are able to "deliver the goods" that Americans crave. The radicals provide the TV audiences only with fleeting footage of bearded picketeers who evoke mindless hate or smug ridicule from both crowds and viewers.

Before the masses appropriated society, it was possible for charismatic radical intellectuals to win their support directly. Now, even snobbery has become more characteristic of the populace than the upper economic classes,

for radicals are considered inferior simply because they belong to the disreputable class of social "misfits."

In the 19th century the populace felt a healthy respect for radical intellectuals, and they shared with them an isolation from societies that had not yet become "popular." They recognized the aristocratic "essence" of intellectuals and granted that they were more likely to know what was best, whatever their politics might be. The marriage of radical intellect and mass discontent brought the welfare societies into being, but the dominant characteristics of the offspring are more democratic than wise. It is now a moot question whether the power elites control the people or visa versa, but the professional classes are at least more open to new ideas than the self-satisfied masses.

Yet many socialists still expend most of their energy searching for direct contacts with the people. Even the Students for a Democratic Society, the main organization of the New Left, has placed on the masthead of its newspaper the slogan "Let the People Decide." In characteristic popular style, the young radicals have fallen back on moralistic and emotional approaches to politics. They attack the Vietnam war as "illegal, immoral, and unjust." Their posture is merely the "abstract" or disjunctive opposite of proletarian sentiments to "bomb the hell out of 'em."

Yet their music and dress is in the vanguard of the current fad of "folk" worship. This fact says much about the bankruptcy of their theoretical understanding. There is a sentimental spirit of Christian altruism and anti-intellectualism in much of the style of the young Left. The young radicals have done noble service in the civil rights struggle, but most of their laurels have been won in the pop cultural field, just as Biff Lowman won his fame on the football field. Until they take a more sober view of "populism," their prospects for saving America are no more promising than those of Biff Lowman, for Black Power is phasing them out of the one area where they had some political effect. But so far they have no sense of the pathos of political salesmanship.

TO TRANSCEND THE PICKET VAUDEVILLE of the current peace movement, radicals must first gain an aggressiveness that is founded in solid intellectual achievements such as those of Herbert Marcuse, Paul Baran and Issac Deutscher. The political campaigns of men like James Weinstein and Robert Sheer are valuable, but less so than their new studies and general critiques of the "quality" of life in our democracy. In this generation, the lasting laurels of the Left will not be won at factory gates, for the workers are rushing home to view the demonstrations safely chopped up by commercials that, as Paul Goodman has noted, protect the silent viewer from thinking about politics.

Unless the current generation of moralistic protesters finds solid theoretical commitments and reexamines the failures of left populism, it will experience the same demoralization so apparent among its elders, where, for every radical there are fifty ex-radicals. If a new politics is possible, it will come from the universities, where there is a life apart from the swirl of mass entertainment and pragmatic politics. Today, there is little room outside the universities for the intellectual freedom and discipline necessary to prepare the young for full lives of confident radicalism.

But radical students who devote most of their time to popular issues and

neglect their own theoretical development will rarely leave the university prepared for a lifelong war on the existing society and its imperialist foreign policy. Their campus years will be a harmless rehearsal for democratic politics in society "at large," where they will gradually become satellites of the mass rather than its leaders.

Ten years ago a Communist leader of the Labor Youth League told me that radicalism must always be active, that "there are no periods when one simply goes to the books." Since then, all that he and his comrades had built has been discredited and lost. Had they spent less time pursuing popular issues and more time becoming radical intellectuals, they would not have expected that a democratic nation would ever accept the leadership of a party that was inspired by the ideals and achievements of its major national rival, regardless of how beautiful the ideals or how valiant the achievements might have been. The masses are moved more often by prejudice than reason, and, although this fact is less true in more prosperous and literate societies, it is of far greater consequence, for in pre-democratic societies the masses rarely determine political events. Unless radicals acknowledge this phenomenon, they face another generation of demoralization.

ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS consequences of "abstract" populism is the typical attitude that liberal socialists assume toward radical movements among backward peoples at home and abroad. Most socialists share with liberals a repugnance for Black Power, Burn Baby Terror and other policies of "irresponsible" protest. They are reluctant to consider the possibility that peaceful moral appeals for "rights" may be insufficient to achieve a growing rather than declining relative share of the gross national product going to blacks.

A similar trend prevails in the world as a whole. The industrialized peoples are leaving the agrarians further behind each year in relative shares of the wealth of the world. This trend is accelerated by increases in world trade, for unskilled labor and raw materials are in gross oversupply.

There are two possible ways to reverse this trend. Either the wealthy will pour massive aid and technical assistance into ghettos and backward nations, or the latter must organize, as the proletarians did in the last century, to exert unified pressures that will offset the natural laws of free enterprise. This would require, at some stage, a world trade union of emerging nations more ambitious than that projected by Sukarno. This sounds utopian to liberal socialists and is repugnant to them because a world 'union shop' would probably be lead by dictators like Mao and Fidel. But these are the only sort of men who understand the futility of isolated nations attempting to offset the growing gap between advanced and backward peoples.

As long as American socialists are no more than a "responsible" opposition to Johnson, as long as they are merely the conscience of the boss, the hope for multibillion dollar aid programs will remain more utopian than the world trade union solution. The winning of distributive welfare societies in the West required more than moral appeals to the conscience of the wealthy. As long as socialists join liberals and conservatives in applying abstract principles of liberalism and democracy to condemn the valiant attempts of backward Communist dictators to industrialize their countries, as long as Mao is judged by

the standard of Norman Thomas, the massive aid that the emerging peoples need will not be forthcoming.

American radicals must prepare themselves to understand the full depth of the problems created by the newly emerging nations. Rather than concentrating on what to do *now* in Vietnam or on the "morality" of this war, they must prepare to reform an America that, as Paul Sweezy predicts, will face a long chain of neo-colonial wars. If we face squarely Ferud's claim that civilization brings increasing frustration, militarism, and death wishes, we must think about more radical policies than those currently offered. The propensity of liberal socialists to respect the *demos* may make it difficult to propose the massive programs of state-financed psychotherapy which the population will need if it is to be deterred from its love of magnificent wars, if we are to gain assurance that the world will not be destroyed merely to "save face." As long as socialists adhere to "Let the People Decide," they will continue to take therapy themselves but shrink from recommending it for the "sick society" which is bent on policing the world.

The people exhibit their desperate need for therapy in the defensive fear they have of psychiatrists, a fear greater even than their fear of radical intellectuals. Ignorance knows its enemies, and they may be easily intimidated if they have excessive respect and tolerance for ignorance. Radicals are given free speech in our democracy because few people think they will have any effect; all opinions are allowed because the democratic consensus seems to make radical truths irrelevant.

Before we can actualize democracy in healthy forms, its smug current perversions must be acknowledged. To overcome the "abstract" principles of liberty and democracy that still prevent us from beginning that task, we might recommend a reading of Hegel. If we take this antidote, we should remember Bosanquet's sober warning: "The hardest lesson in interpretation is to believe that great men mean what they say. We are below their level, and what they actually say seems impossible to us, till we have adulterated it to suit our own imbecility."

Liberal socialists remember the pure tolerance they found in J. S. Mill, but forget his emphasis on the importance of geniuses and his contempt for the mindlessness of public opinion. American socialists have been distrustful of adopting intellectual heroes like Hegel and Freud. This is a grave symptom of their lack of faith in radical theory. That faith must be replenished if socialists are to become the leaders of liberal democracy rather than its captives.

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The Limits of Historical Speculation

ROBERT HEILBRONER PREMISES THE ARGUMENT of this suggestive, lucidly composed volume on the *durability* of the business system in America in the historical short run—the next 30-50 years.¹ The premise is difficult to fault: in the U.S. capitalism has been only transiently, and as it has turned out, ineffectually challenged as an institution, and now, “the specter of its overthrow by violent revolution has . . . receded. . . .” Social peace in America may occasionally be threatened, but not the viability of the system. The “structure of privilege” is unlikely to suffer erosion; production for profit rather than for use, or private ownership in the means of production and communication, or concentration of economic power and wealth—these bases of the system, which define the social order in America, are likely to remain undisturbed. Solutions to problems of unemployment, poverty and cyclical instability do not require attacks on the structure of privilege; growth in productivity, ensured as it is by the very workings of the system, can provide the means of alleviating poverty; the increasing sophistication of business leaders should in time yield more readily to government the freedom necessary to stabilize the economy and to provide (or generate) job opportunities; and some forms of planning will eventually become more acceptable.

Thus, the limits of American capitalism are broadly staked, leaving much room for accommodating the claims of

the less privileged. Privilege in capitalist society is, in any case, much more tolerable than privilege in feudal society. It is closely tied to economic function: private property for example, is “a pragmatic arrangement devised for the facilitation of production,” *as well as* “a social institution whose existence and function brings to some members of the community a style of life qualitatively different from that afforded to the community in general. . . .” Privilege is not extracted from society as it was under feudalism. Being functionally related to the economic system, it is limited to the advantages which that system yields. These advantages are not restricted by legal devices to any particular group, although they are in fact monopolized by a small number of wealthholders. These, however, are to some extent subject to the “corrective efforts of the democratic electorate.”

But “corrective efforts” are not tantamount to basic change of the system; the limits of capitalism—and hence the limits of capitalist politics—are unlikely to be transgressed by the electorate, and indeed Heilbroner evidently does not view the political process as an agent of basic institutional change. Nor does he formulate any “law of motion,” a dynamic inherent in the capitalist economy that would lead to eventual breakdown, and compel transformation through conscious political action by an adversary class. Rather, according to Heilbroner, change will come through gradual supercession of capitalist institutions and its elites by new elites and new

¹ *The Limits of American Capitalism* by Robert Heilbroner. Harper & Row, New York, 1965. \$4.95.