

# POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

**Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century.** Claude Pepper, Hays Gorey. *Harcourt Brace Jovanovich*, \$17.95. A month after Black Monday, while congressional and White House leaders held an "economic summit" to reduce the deficit, 87-year-old Rep. Claude Pepper swore his opposition to including Social Security cuts in the package. Pepper threatened to use his power as Rules Committee chairman to force a separate vote on the issue. Although Social Security was one program that could stand to be cut because it fails to distinguish between rich and poor recipients, the summit left it alone. The paltry \$30 billion in budget cuts that the summit finally produced can be blamed largely on Pepper's unfortunate influence.

Pepper's career in politics reflects the best and worst of the New Deal. His unbending opposition to means testing or even taxing Social Security benefits is the New Deal's worst legacy: mindless support for expensive government programs without concern that benefits be targeted to those in need. But as a senator from 1937 to 1950, Pepper showed what was noblest in the New Deal: passionate commitment to the down-and-out. Pepper sponsored the first minimum-wage, maximum-hours bill; he sponsored bills to expand government research to fight disease through the National Institutes of Health; and he helped Franklin D. Roosevelt kill tax breaks for the "economic royalists." Such positions were risky for a southerner, but Pepper was committed to helping the afflicted and opposing privilege. When World War II approached, Pepper showed he was also eager to fight Nazis: he bucked Senate isolationism by sponsoring the first Lend-Lease bill.

It all came crashing down at the height of McCarthyism in 1950, when Pepper was labeled "Red Pepper" for meeting with Josef Stalin and allowing himself to be photographed with Paul Robeson and Henry Wallace. Opponent George Smathers told audiences that Pepper had learned the law under the "crimson of Harvard." Pepper also was made to suffer for his advocacy

of socialized medicine and his failure to oppose civil-rights legislation. In an unusually ugly campaign year (Richard Nixon used similar tactics against Helen Gahagan Douglas), Pepper was sent into humiliating exile.

When he returned in 1963, it was to the House, not the Senate. Pepper's defeat had not sapped his energy; to this day, he is a forceful and shrewd legislator. But it's possible he lost some of his nerve. Pepper fervently denies that his role as broker for the elderly reflects his Florida district's gray constituency. (He also takes exception to accusations that his support for Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" reflects the growing number of Cubans in his district.) To be fair, Pepper has supported senior citizens throughout his career: the first bill he sponsored as a young Florida state legislator exempted the elderly from a fishing license fee, and Pepper championed the fledgling Social Security program in the late 1930s, before it became a sacred cow. The book's most intriguing revelation is that Pepper used to argue with his wife about "my continuing closeness with the family" (that is his mother and father), who lived with the young Peppers. This may suggest a more subliminal explanation for Pepper's devotion to Social Security at any cost. He remembers what a drag it was keeping the old folks in the spare room.

—Timothy Noah

**The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism.** Miklos Haraszti. *Basic Books*, \$14.95. Lenin once said that he was afraid to listen to Beethoven because the music made him feel like caressing the people's heads when he needed to beat them. In his chilling exploration of state-directed culture under socialism, Miklos Haraszti, a leading Hungarian dissident, shows that post-Stalinist Eastern European leaders have developed a new and uniquely effective method of cultural control: they beat heads with a caress.

At a time when Soviet citizens

and Western observers alike are trying to figure out just what Mikhail Gorbachev means by "glasnost," the new English translation of *Velvet Prison* is not reassuring. Haraszti argues that the experience of the Hungarian intelligentsia suggests an overt loosening of state control may be the harbinger of subtler, more manipulative constraints. Even worse, a loosening may indicate that the intellectuals have been so thoroughly co-opted as to make censorship obsolete.

The plight of the artist under totalitarianism is a familiar subject, but Haraszti shows just how artists have been co-opted. The state tests prospective artists at an early age for ability and docility. The special art schools, where most Hungarian mothers would love to send their children, use a small stick and a big carrot. State teachers condemn any work that is ambiguous or demands individual interpretation. But if they graduate, the pampered prodigies are granted lifetime job security and a guaranteed market as well as a comfortable social position among the state elite, drawing a white-collar salary and attending luxurious retreats.

The state encourages its artists to borrow not only from their pre-revolutionary heritage but also from the West. The only condition: be it cubism, literary minimalism, or rock and roll, a style borrowed from the West must be sufficiently banal to be useful. Even Rambo, Haraszti muses, may someday have a place in Hungarian culture.

In order to capture the mind-set of this "soft" censorship, Haraszti has done some co-opting of his own. The book is written in the language of the state artist and is structured like a manual/manifesto of "socially committed art." But through the dull ideological polish shines Haraszti's biting sarcasm. The author points out that in a directed culture real meaning must be read "between the lines," and he has created a brilliantly artistic book that makes the reader do the same.

Haraszti admits that *Velvet Prison* is a pessimistic little book.

After hearing about the recent Moscow International Book Fair, where dissident Soviet writers were invited to mingle with prominent Soviet censors, I can't help but wonder if Gorbachev is borrowing more than just agricultural reform from Hungary.

—Michael Willrich

**Chile: Death in the South.** Jacobo Timerman. *Alfred A. Knopf*, \$15.95. This chilling book, which first appeared as a *New Yorker* series, is a textbook on dictatorship and how people learn to live with it. Timerman will horrify those who are romantics about Chile and are still waiting for General Pinochet to be swept out of office by a tide of protest.

The reality Timerman presents is this: Pinochet has maintained himself for 14 years as dictator of what was once the most democratic country in Latin America. He has bought the support, or at least the silence, of the middle and upper classes with cheap consumer goods. He has used fear, with surgical precision, to quiet the poor and those who couldn't be bought. There is active opposition, but on a very small scale. Today the government kills about 55 people a year. No one doubts Pinochet would kill more if he needed to, but he doesn't need to. In this once passionately political country, the latest strikes have been broken and the opposition daily newspapers are in danger of closing for want of readers. Timerman, himself a victim of torture in Argentina, quotes an opposition leader expressing his shock at the torturers who have emerged from the entrails of Chile, but when Timerman uses the quote he is not talking just about the government, but about Chileans.

Most of the book is about the opposition politicians and why they have been unable to enlist Chileans—85 percent of whom oppose Pinochet—in the struggle. Timerman says little about the limits of their existence: the constant danger and the lack of access to television or elections. He focuses on what the limits have produced: a romantic cocoon of

nostalgia that has rendered the opposition irrelevant. For him, the anti-Pinochet theater, magazines, and coffeehouses that nourish the opposition are an escape valve created by the regime to let off pressure. He criticizes the opposition parties' unwillingness to compromise and the hard left's tolerance for violence, which drives moderate Chileans into Pinochet's camp.

The book's most serious flaw is that its prescriptions, based in compromise, are jarring and unconvincing. But why should Timerman have found a way to defeat Pinochet? No one else has; the likelihood is that none exists.

—Tina Rosenberg

### **Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution.**

Frank Levy. *Russell Sage*. \$27.50. Frank Levy has immersed himself in Census data and emerged with a depressing but significant story to tell: America has indeed been quietly slipping backwards for over a decade. In 1973, the average 40-year-old man earned \$28,118 (in constant 1984 dollars). Ten years later, at age 50, he was making only \$24,132. Meanwhile, the 40-year-olds of 1984 were earning even less—about 17 percent less than the 40-year-olds of 1973. Looking at these figures, you wonder not why there has been so much political "malaise" (to coin a phrase) since 1973, but why there hasn't been a revolution.

The reason is that the decline in individual earnings was masked by the well-known entry of second earners into the work force, so that *family* income didn't decline as rapidly. Even so, the proportion of husband-wife families making over \$30,000, when corrected for inflation, declined from 51 percent in 1973 to 45 percent in 1984. Americans had a reason for suspecting that, despite Walkmen and microwave ovens, they weren't living as well as their parents had lived in the sixties. They weren't.

Does this mean the middle class is disappearing? Not if you define "middle class" as whoever is in the middle. The middle is still by far the

fattest part of the income distribution. But because everyone slipped backwards, "being in the middle of the distribution" no longer guarantees that you could buy the things you once thought "middle class" people could buy.

There has been a small increase in inequality to go with the overall stagnation of earnings. But it was the stagnation, Levy argues, that made the inequality seem ominous. When the whole train is moving forward, people don't worry so much whether they are in the first or last car. It's when the train stops that it becomes very important to get away from the caboose. Incomes have always been unequal. But without growth and upward mobility, people suddenly feel locked in at their level. "Inequality of prospects" rises more rapidly than actual money inequality.

And whether there's more inequality or less, Levy notes, there is good reason to lament the loss of industrial jobs that pay high wages without demanding the technical training of a software-programmer or the smooth interpersonal skills of a marketing rep. It's one thing to have inequality of income; it's another to have inequality based rigorously on skills or credentials. That gives the whole income distribution a nasty meritocratic bite—smart people in the upper quintiles, dummies down below.

Scattered throughout Levy's book are surprising, and sometimes profoundly distressing statistics. One of the latter is the black male adult unemployment rate in 1968-69. It was 3.8 percent. Today, it is 10.2 percent. Yet liberals who recite these depressing economic trends, as if they automatically reflect discrimination, might note that three-quarters of black husband and wife families now have incomes that put them in the top three quintiles, a major success story. Unfortunately, most black children are not being born into such husband-wife families.

Levy is not a polemicist, though sometimes you wish he were. He tells his story calmly and clearly, with a minimum of jargon. *Dollars and Dreams* deserves a larger au-