

THE ABSENCE OF IDEAS

Theory and Practice in American Politics

Michael Harrington

Utopian pragmatism has dominated the recent theory and practice of American politics.

Everybody knows about pragmatism. Practically all the politicians and most of the academics believe that America is a blessedly anti-ideological land where elections are rightly won at the Center rather than on the Right and Left. The utopianism is, however, either unconscious or shamefaced. There is a deep belief that the world has been so benevolently designed that the solution to problems of unprecedented technological, economic and social change are always to be found in the middle of the road. Not since Adam Smith's invisible hand was thought to vector a myriad of private greeds into a common good has there been such faith in a secular providence.

Professor John H. Bunzel's new book, *Anti-Politics in America* (Knopf, 1967, \$6.95) makes one of the latest statements of this thesis. I propose to take his work, not as the subject for a considered review, but as a point of departure for considering this utopian pragmatism. In fairness to Bunzel, I should make it clear that his study contains much that is thoughtful and well said and that I am here abstracting only one element from it. He is an advocate of positive social change, a concerned and committed man, and I share many of his values. That is why I am all the more disturbed that he, like so many liberals, insists upon a tough-minded naiveté.

The "anti-politics" in Bunzel's title refers to those on the Right and Left who disdain the mainstream of American life in the name of some transcendent principle. In terms of Max Weber's fashionable distinction they act upon the basis of an "ethic of ultimate ends" rather than an "ethic of responsibility." Typically, both the Right and Left are seen as illustrating the same utopian pragmatist principle: that those who eschew the political role of the bargainer and negotiator are irrelevant at best and dangerous to democracy at their worst. In all of this Bunzel assumes, as the majority of social scientists in America also do,

that if these people would only content themselves with increments of change they could help the society solve its problems. Such a view implicitly affirms that the contemporary crisis is a very benign affair indeed. But utopian pragmatism is of more than just scholarly interest. Lyndon B. Johnson acts so consistently in its spirit that one almost suspects him of being a disciplined ideologue. An analysis of the academic doctrine is, then, relevant to the future of American politics.

Utopian pragmatism became fashionable after World War II, in part as a reaction to the rigid intellectual categories in vogue in the Thirties. In that era, a vulgarized Marxism had schematically projected American society as reflex of oversimplified class antagonisms. This approach produced more than its share of crudities and, as befits a dialectical method, it provoked its own negation. In the postwar years, semi-affluence intensified the revulsion to "Thirties-style" thinking. Many thinkers ignored the crises of the Fifties and Sixties on the grounds that the breadlines had not returned. So it was discovered that America is a pluralistic nation in which power is shared, statesmen are properly the brokers of interest groups, and endless progress is possible so long as no one gets too principled.

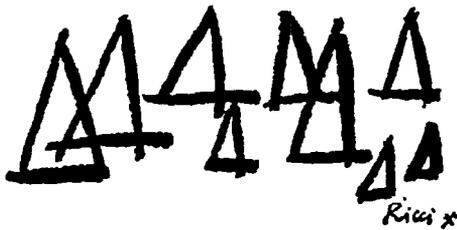
The notion that America is a unique place which is exempt from the polarizations of the class struggle is not, of course, new. At the beginning of the century Werner Sombart was already theorizing that the abundance of roast beef and apple pie explained the absence of a mass socialist movement in this country. But the current belief in utopian pragmatism goes far beyond this rudimentary sociology. Everything about American life — its geography, its constitutional institutions, and even its most advanced techniques — is supposed to conspire to deliver the country from the European curse of ideology. In the latest versions of this analysis, there is even hope for the Europeans if only they will act like Americans.

Here, for instance, is how Samuel Lubell pictures the political scene: "To win the Presidency each party must appeal to a cross section of voters, to Midwesterners as well as to Easterners, to employers as well

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as to factory workers. Extreme differences must be conciliated, thus putting a premium upon the arts of compromise which have helped hold this country together." In this vast land, Lubell says, the basic drama is not the battle of Left and Right but the "constant struggle for national unification." So the sectional deal is necessarily one of our most typical arrangements.

Others, like James McGregor Burns, trace the diffuseness of American politics back to a conscious decision. The Madisonians were so bent on thwarting the triumph of faction that they fragmented power into an intricate system of checks and balances. Since practically every group had a veto over every other group, even a clear and democratic majority is forced to the arts of wheedling. At its worst, Burns said, this could produce a "deadlock of democracy." Yet, in a bow to the prevailing optimism, he still holds that the "overlapping, jostling, crisscrossing, mutually interdependent networks of leaders and followers" in American politics are a basic source of stability.



More recently, the futuristic potential of economic and social accounting has been seen as giving renewed strength to the hallowed tradition of anti-ideology. Government intervention, Daniel Patrick Moynihan has written, is more and more becoming a matter for experts drawing upon the latest research in the academy. Therefore the days of the "mile-long petitions and mass rallies" are over; there is a decline "in the moral exhilaration of public affairs at the domestic level." An elite scientific objectivity thus takes the place of the clash of political programs. Max Ways of *Fortune* magazine has taken up this theme on behalf of private enterprise. Now that there is going to be *problem solving rather than class struggle*, he proposes that the corporations contract to redesign the country.

Now there is clearly some truth in these various explanations of the American reality. Yet, for all their fascination with complexity, they tend to be overly neat. For instance, America has had the most violent, bloody trade union history of any advanced nation. And, as Seymour Martin Lipset documented in his *Political Man*, after World War II the American worker supported the Democratic Party more cohe-

sively than his British counterpart, in a supposedly class conscious culture, backed the Labour Party. Most important of all, the utopian pragmatists ignore, or pass over, the realigning elections in American history. There were great issues and furious passions evoked by the Republican victory of 1860, the triumph of East and Midwest over the Populist South and West in 1896, the New Deal sweeps of 1934 and 1936. At such moments, an entirely new political context was created. Then, the deals, the compromises and the conciliation took place within a transformed framework.

Even the new specialization of government could have an effect quite different from the one imagined by Moynihan and Ways. Daniel Bell, himself one of the chief theorists of the "end of ideology," points out that the more planning and state intervention there is, the more group conflict there will be. For now there is a "specific locus of decisions which becomes a visible point at which pressures can be applied." The arguments which the old order used to exclude academics from practical affairs were also used to keep the people in a subordinate place: the basic priorities were alleged to be established by an impersonal market place, not by philosophers or masses. And the very rationale which brings the university men to Washington allows the people to come too. The fair employment title of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was not drafted in the streets but, politically speaking, it was inserted in the law as a result of the March on Washington of 1963.

In short, the utopian pragmatist interpretation of American history is open to challenge. So is its faith in the ultimately ethical character of the unideological facts. For it holds that all the accidents of the nation's geography, politics and class structure have converged upon the best of all possible worlds and pointed a moral about moderation.

Since America is, in Bunzel's phrase, a country with a "politics of compromisable interests," it follows that "those of outspoken zeal for whom nothing less than some large social transformation will occupy their thoughts" are ineffective and irrelevant. So wheeling and dealing is not to be tolerated but praised, and prophets are to be shunned. And though the idealists talk arrogantly in the name of morality in government, they have actually placed themselves outside of politics altogether. The truly responsible man accepts his social change in modest installments.

Roger Hilsman's description of the mechanics of power in Washington in *To Move a Nation* (Doubleday, 1967, \$6.95.) could almost be taken as a factual corroboration of Bunzel's theory. He writes, "Rather than through grand decisions or grand alternatives,

policy changes seem to come through a series of modifications of existing policy, with the new policy emerging slowly and haltingly by small and usually tentative steps, a process of trial and error in which policy zigs and zags, reverses itself and then moves forward in a series of incremental steps.”

But can the challenges of the Seventies and Eighties thus be met an inch at a time? This is the sheerest utopianism even though it is couched in the language of *realpolitik*. It has been recognized — ironically, on the initiative of defense planners — that the crises of transportation, the cities, pollution and all the rest are systemic and not discrete. If the problems are massive and integrated and coherent, the solutions obviously must be too. Under such circumstances, serious men will have to think of “nothing less than some large social transformations” or else there will be no adequate response. And although the mere existence of a desperate need for change does not necessarily make people desire it, it at least opens up the possibility. There could be a realigning election in the foreseeable future and some fairly sweeping proposals had better be thought out well in advance of the opportunity.

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A personal anecdote might make this last point clearer. In 1964, immediately after President Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver to head the War on Poverty, I spent two weeks as a consultant to the task force which eventually drew up the Economic Opportunity Act. At my first meeting with Shriver, I told him that the billion dollars which the White House was investing in the project was “nickels and dimes” (“Oh really, Mr. Harrington,” Shriver replied. “I don’t know about you but this is the first time I’ve ever spent a billion dollars”). But as the days went on, I became conscious that the intellectual deficit was even greater than the financial one. The task force members were dedicated, often brilliant. Yet all of us suffered from the fact that, during the Eisenhower decade, few people had thought of what to do about poverty. When the moment for action finally came, practical men were hamstrung because there were not enough visionaries who had preceded them.

But then the entire Johnson Administration, and not just the War on Poverty, illustrates the problematic power of utopian pragmatism in American life. It made Mr. Johnson miss one of the greatest political opportunities in recent American history, the election of 1964. For this incredible landslide involved, among other things, a failure of leadership.

In the aftermath of 1964, there were many who believed that the triumph had been so decisive that

the nation had turned a political corner. The nation, Samuel Lubell said, had a decisive majority which “opened a new political epoch.” And in 1965, the Congress seemed anxious to confirm this optimistic analysis. There were Federal aid to education, Medicare, a civil rights law, anti-poverty action, a cabinet seat for the cities, and so on. It seemed that, were it not for the escalation of the war in Vietnam, Mr. Johnson would have achieved his youthful ambition of becoming a second Franklin Roosevelt.

In reality, 1964 was the end of an old era and not the beginning of a new one.

John F. Kennedy had been stymied by the Dixiecrat-Republican coalition which had ruled Congress since 1938. He was forced to adopt a strategy of prudence in order to win some Southern Democratic congressmen to his side. So he regularly proposed bills which were inadequate by the standards of his own planners and, if these were passed at all, they were further watered down. By the year of Kennedy’s death, there was hardly a political analyst who did not agree with James MacGregor Burns about the deadlock of democracy.

The emotional shock of the President’s assassination made it possible for Mr. Johnson to move even before November 1964. But it was Barry Goldwater who truly prepared the way for his legislative triumphs of 1965. Goldwater’s campaign strategy was precisely an attempt to force a realigning election. He proposed to win the South away from the Democratic Party and, by uniting it with Republican strength in the Midwest, create a completely new political context. In fact, Goldwater drove the moderates and independents into the Johnson camp. So a fantastic coalition was assembled, stretching from Martin Luther King, Jr., to Russell Long and from Walter Reuther to Henry Ford.

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In *The Making of a President, 1964*, Theodore White provides a revealing glimpse of a debate which took place within the Johnson staff during the election: “Among the speech writers the dialogue was different from the dialogue among the strategists. What was the object of the Johnson campaign, asked some of the speech writers — to ‘broaden the base’ or to ‘shape the mandate’? It was a luxurious internal argument open only to men certain of victory. Should they stage a campaign whose purpose was to harvest the greatest majority in American history? . . . Or should they press the campaign in another way? To spend in advance some of the certain margin of victory by putting before the people such hard, cleaving issues as might lose a few million votes but would shape

an explicit mandate to give the President clear authority for the new programs of his next administration?"

White believes that Johnson both expanded the safe middle ground and shaped his mandate. In fact, he sought new votes but not new ideas. This was the reason that his Congressional troubles began even before the Democratic defeats of 1966. The program which Johnson proposed in 1964 and legislated in 1965 was essentially the culmination of the New Deal. Most of the measures in it had been debated for almost a generation and had been thwarted because of the undemocratic strength of the Dixiecrat-Republican coalition. There was a popular majority in favor of these bills and — once Barry Goldwater performed the great service of getting the reactionary coalition out of the cloakroom and onto the ballot — it was inevitable that they would be passed. So the 1964 landslide finally vindicated the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt. It did not, however, inaugurate the Great Society of Lyndon Johnson.

Thus it was that prior to the 1966 election, the very same Congress which had been so enthusiastic about Medicare and education and the rest became recalcitrant about rent subsidies, the teacher corps and demonstration (or model) cities. These were, for all of their inadequacy and tentativeness, new ideas and principles and the President had neglected the magnificent opportunity to present them to the American people under the euphoric conditions of the 1964 election. His utopian faith in consensus kept him from telling the electorate about the conflict-torn practicalities of the future.

Ironically, it is Mr. Johnson's own administration which provides the best statistical proof of the inequity of his programs. Time after time a problematic

area is defined in crisis terms and then approached nonchalantly. In 1966, for instance, the White House Conference on civil rights asserted that the country must build two million new units of housing a year, 500,000 of them for low-income families. In the following year, the President proposed to meet the challenge which he had helped to measure by building one-third of the low-cost units he himself had proved were necessary.

It is even possible that Johnson has over-persuaded the American people of his own accomplishments. In 1966 many analysts said that people voted Republican because they wanted to slow down the tidal wave of change which had begun under the Great Society. In fact the tidal wave was more of a rhetorical figment than anything else. The "unconditional" War on Poverty turned out to be a skirmish and even Mrs. Johnson's beautification program was blocked by the billboard lobby. But all the talk had given the impression that massive alterations in the social structure were taking place. Some people probably did cast real votes against an imaginary revolution.

So the realigning election which will take America beyond Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal is yet to come. More and more the Government's figures demonstrate that the gradual increments of change, so dear to the hearts of utopian pragmatists, simply do not suffice. The cities continue to decay, the roads and skies become more congested and polluted, the Negroes are driven to a despairing, nihilistic violence, and so on. If the scholars, like Bunzel, and the politicians like Johnson do not give up their wildly optimistic view of things, an extremist reality may well take revenge on the nation's complacency. There will be large ideas or else.

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To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy

Roger Hilsman. Doubleday. 602 pp. \$6.95

What was begun in 1958 as a theoretical study of the nature of the policy-making process based on case study materials became, in consequence of Hilsman's involvement in the decisions of the Kennedy Administration (as head of Intelligence in the State Dept. and then as Assistant Secretary for the Far East), a theoretical study "in which the case studies themselves are prominent." The particular problems with which he deals center about the C.I.A., and about crises in Laos, Cuba, the Congo, Communist China, Indonesia and Malaya, and Vietnam.

The Church Unbound

Norman K. Gottwald. Lippincott. 188 pp. \$4.95

Dr. Gottwald contends "that a number of familiar church-culture interaction-patterns emerged in ancient Israel, which have had profound influence on all later Jewish and Christian thought," and further, "that these patterns require serious re-examination and reconstituting if the church is to be creatively responsive to our age." The author, professor of Old Testament and of Biblical Theology and Ethics at Berkeley, includes here "not only secular politics (the relation of church to nation" but what he calls "ecumenical politics (the relation of church to synagogue and of church to other religions."

Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience

Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham J. Heschel, Michael Novak. Association Press, Behrman House, Herder & Herder. 127 pp. 95¢ (paper)

The authors, who represent three major religious traditions, were participants in the late winter Washington "mobilization" sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, and their work is addressed to "our churches and synagogues [which] have been unwilling to face the moral implications" of the conflict. In addition to the essays which examine these moral issues and recommend steps which churches and synagogues can take to bring about changes in American policy, there is a brief sampling of statements by leading religious bodies "to indicate that part of our task is simply to catch up with our own leadership."

The U.N. Secretary-General and the Maintenance of Peace

Leon Gordenker. Columbia. 380 pp. \$8.50

Three Secretaries-General of the U.N. have responded in different ways to a variety of challenges presented in line with one aspect of their duties, the maintenance of world peace and security. This book is an analysis of the origins and development of the Secretary's office and of the techniques employed by Lie, Hammarskjöld and Thant in response to major crises in this area as they played their roles of administrator, representative, consultant, negotiator, mediator, and spokesman for world peace.

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worldview

volume 10, no. 9 / September 1967

WORLDVIEW is published monthly (except for a combined July-August issue) by the Council on Religion and International Affairs
Subscription: \$4.00 per year.

Address: 170 East 64th Street, New York, New York 10021

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