

In Another America

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That extraordinarily valuable citizen Michael Harrington is, among his many other public activities, Chairman of the Socialist Party, USA. So quiet a life do socialists now lead that one is nearly tempted to list this post as a harmless private avocation. Yet in the days of Eugene Debs, American socialism was a serious political movement. Michael Harrington would have it so again.

As Harrington recalls in *Socialism* (Saturday Review Press; 436 pp.; \$12.50), his impressive analysis of the Socialist past and less impressive account of the Socialist present, Debs in 1912 actually collected 6 per cent of the Presidential votes. In 340 cities, 1,200 Socialists held office, among them 79 mayors. Even two decades later, in the 1932 Presidential campaign, Norman Thomas attracted nearly a million votes and the Party boasted 1,600 local affiliates.

1932 was the highwater mark, not the beginning of a Socialist tidal wave. Startled by success, Socialists indulged themselves in the luxury of doctrinal quarrels and splits. In the competition for radical support, the Communist Party, in its 1935-1939 Popular Front phase, proved more than a match for the Socialists. Even if the latter had been united, the Communists possessed an unmatchable advantage, they shared in the glamor of Soviet "achievements" during a time when the Left fashionable opinion held that the Russians were well on the road to a new, better and more democratic society.

In Harrington's tale, the major villain of the Socialist tragedy was Franklin Roosevelt, not Earl Browder. Roosevelt and the New Deal split the Party. Men like Sidney Hillman deserted socialism in order to support Roosevelt. Quite accurately, Hillman identified Roosevelt as a practical reformer will-

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ing and able to create a political environment favorable to union organization and legislative objectives. Hillman's perception was indeed consistent with the judgment of embittered Socialist opponents of FDR, who regarded him as the strongest prop of the rickety capitalist system and hence an "objectively" reactionary figure.

In pursuit of simultaneous recovery and reform, Roosevelt pursued tactics and politics varied and contradictory enough to gratify at some point almost any political taste. NRA, which featured industrial self-government, was unpleasantly reminiscent of Mussolini's brand of corporate fascism. NRA was balanced (or contradicted) by sporadic exercises in trust-busting, colorful rhetoric about money-changers and temples, and the inquiries of the Temporary National Economic Commission into concentration of economic power. The story was much the same in agriculture. The two AAA's, 1933 and 1938, worked out as subsidies to large commercial farmers rather than benefits to the rural poor. But TVA plausibly resembled genuine regional planning, and some of Tugwell's adventures with model communities harked back to the visions of the Utopian socialists.

Roosevelt junked the classical economics which befuddled Herbert Hoover, but no evidence exists that he understood Keynesian doctrine. His single meeting with the English master was an unfruitful comedy of mutual disappointment. On the eve of the Second World War, unemployment measured a horrifying 14 per cent and economists speculated about secular stagnation in the American economy. Nevertheless, Roosevelt did countenance continuing federal budgetary deficits until partial recovery led him characteristically to reverse his field and revert disastrously (though briefly) to fiscal orthodoxy. Overall, the New Deal deficits were too small and economic policy too inconsistent to generate full economic recovery. Not until Dr. Win the War superseded Dr. New Deal did the American economy

once again operate at its full capacity.

Harrington does not scant the inconsistencies and cross-purposes in which the New Deal specialized. In the end, however, he shares Hillman's belief in the broad, social democratic character of the Roosevelt era. Roosevelt emerges as the heir of "our invisible mass movement—the American social democracy." As Harrington interprets American political history, this mass movement is energized by union power and blue-collar class consciousness. The unions during the 1930's cut themselves loose from a voluntaristic tradition deeply distrustful of state intervention and embarked on an open struggle for political influence and power. In Harrington's words, "Labor had entered into politics with a distinctive program and had organized on a class basis."

In the 1950's and the 1960's, the unions steadily moved leftward, at least if one accepts the evidence cited by Harrington of official positions. By 1965, the AFL-CIO was routinely approving convention resolutions in favor of national planning, massive urban expenditures, national health, resources conservation, and large hikes in social security. George Meany continued to see the world in Communist black and American white. He remained an unrepentant Vietnam hawk. He was also capable of telling his constituents (in 1967) that "Increasingly the problems of our members—which they share with everyone else—are not so much the problems of the work place itself, but problems of environment and problems of living and raising a family in today's complex, urbanized and suburbanized society."

In short, the most important explanation of the decline of American socialism is the comparative success of American social democracy. Unions and liberal national administrations have combined to soften the acerbities of market capitalism by social and political reform. Jerry-built, inequitable, and ungenerous to the weak as it is, the American Welfare State does represent increasing protection against the disasters of age, illness and unemployment. The acceptance, still grudging in many ways, of the Welfare State by the business community does attest to a degree of capitalist flexibility. This electoral season will tell us how far this social democratic impulse can travel. Its outer reaches are occupied by a George McGovern who proposes to make capitalism more egalitarian by taxing the rich more heavily and transferring the proceeds to the rest of us.

Michael Harrington is, he reminds his readers, a Socialist, not a social democrat. The distinction is crucial. Even a social democratic America is in principle fatally defective. Operating within the limits of capitalism, social democrats perforce preserve much of the inequality and insecurity which cloud the daily lives of ordinary people. So long as gross inequality persists, the rich exercise political power disproportionate to their numbers. Their capacity to manipulate politicians and public policy is an imple-

it threat to the moderate redistributive measures of social democracy. Some of the embarrassing continuities between Kennedy-Johnson and Nixon economic policies register these plutocratic facts.

Thus early in his brief Administration, John Kennedy faced a crucial choice between stimulating the economy by cutting taxes and achieving the same objective by raising social spending. The first technique enlarges the private sector and the second expands public control over resource allocation. Rejecting the advice of Galbraith, Kennedy chose to cut taxes. We are experiencing the consequences of this fateful choice. Tax reductions in 1964, 1965, 1969, and 1971 deprive the Treasury of between \$45-50 billion *each year*. Why shouldn't Richard Nixon announce that he is a Keynesian? His business constituents had learned the useful lesson that their profits flourished in the fostering climate of a reactionary version of Keynes which stimulated economic growth with subsidies to businessmen.

The limits of the social democratic impulse are bound to be narrow because capitalism cannot escape from the logic of its own contradictions. High employment raises wages and threatens profits. Low wages narrow the mass market for the mountains of goods which technology generates. Karl Marx has a message for contemporary capitalism.

In the middle of the initial 108 pages which Harrington devotes to the identification of a Marxist tradition useful to democratic socialists, there is lodged this comment: "It could be plausibly argued that the Karl Marx who is described in these pages is a backward and wishful projection of this writer's present politics." Harrington cannot help noting a "remarkable convergence between my current attitudes and my version of history." Which is only to say that Harrington has ransacked doctrinal history for urgent contemporary purposes.

Is Harrington's Marx plausible? On the whole he is. Like many other writers, Harrington describes Marx as a superb polemicist, erudite economic historian, and keen analyst of nineteenth-century capitalism. Marx, as Harrington reads him, is also a humanist and a democrat. True, Marx does pass through a brief anti-democratic period in the wake of his disappointment at the failures of the revolutions of 1847. This aberration aside, Marx was a believer in the necessity of revolution from below and an opponent of elitist doctrines which demanded the manipulation of the masses by the few. He opposed the elitists even when, as in the embarrassing instance of Ferdinand Lassalle, they cited earlier Marxist doctrine he had later rejected.

Occasionally Harrington protests too much. Not entirely convincingly he defends his hero against really meaning dictatorship when he describes in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* the dictatorship of the proletariat as the political principle of the first

stage of post-revolutionary socialism. Since, argues Harrington, politics invariably expresses the interests of the dominant class, capitalist democracies are actually dictatorships of the bourgeoisie. A dictatorship of the proletariat at least defines the rule of a majority instead of a minority. Maybe so, but rather hard all the same on the few capitalists who survive the revolution and find themselves the sole targets of proletarian dictatorship.

Marx the humanist and Marx the student of alienation are most in evidence in early works like the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which have been rediscovered by the New Left. In *The Greening of America*, Charles Reich quite accurately credits the Marxist analysis of how capitalism alienates man from pride in his work, confidence in his skills, and pleasure in the integration of work and leisure with anticipating and suggesting much of his own interpretation of contemporary experience.

Harrington rejects the notion that the mature Marx discarded as romantic these earlier insights into the human condition. He argues quite convincingly the contrary position, that the three volumes of *Das Kapital* should be read as a powerful historical and analytical gloss on the theories of man which Marx devised in his early works.

Harrington is so enthusiastic about the Marx whom he has rediscovered that he makes his hero a more consistent economist than in fact he was. I find here no resolution of a stubborn difficulty which confronts anyone who takes seriously the Marxist analysis of capitalist contradictions. Marx predicts, to begin with, that as capitalism matures, rates of profit will diminish. The technological imperatives which operate upon capitalists compel them to substitute more and more machinery (constant capital) for human labor power (variable capital). Since it is a central feature of the Marxist theory of value that profit (surplus value) can be derived from the exploitation of human labor power only, technological progress implies falling rates of profit. Here there is a difficulty. If the rate of exploitation does not rise, those workers who retain their jobs will in absolute terms improve their situation and in relative terms maintain it unchanged.

Such an outcome imperils a second central Marxist prediction, the increasing misery of the proletariat, at least relatively understood. Workers may feel more deprived simply because the gap between them and their capitalist oppressors widens even when the condition of both groups in absolute terms is improving. Relative deprivation will increase if the rate of exploitation rises and the proletarian share of income falls. But in that event, the rate of profit need not drop. In brief, it is difficult within Marxist terms to demonstrate the inevitability both of declining rates of profit and a rising incidence of relative deprivation. The difficulty has interesting



consequences (of which, more shortly), for Harrington's theories of socialist coalition.

I have perhaps said enough to suggest my admiration for Harrington's close and usually convincing reinterpretation of Karl Marx.

Harrington endured the pains of scholarship in order to enlist Karl Marx in his crusade to turn social democratic America into socialist America. If revolutions are made from below, which are the social groups which in coalition can do the job?

Harrington nominates three. The first and largest is composed of the old working class, blue-collar factory workers whose actual numbers continue to increase even though their importance in the labor force diminishes. The second partner, harking back to Veblen, is Galbraith's technostucture, the new working class of knowledge specialists—technicians, engineers, computer programmers, economists, media experts, lawyers, accountants, and assorted wizards of many magics. Usually these generally well-paid souls like to define themselves as members of professional guilds. In time of recession, their true class situation is brought home to them. During episodes like the Nixon recession of 1969-1971, they are shocked to discover that their jobs and incomes are as much out of their control as are the jobs and incomes of humble assembly-line operatives. Harrington's "new socialist majority" enlists, finally, the disaffected young who are neither technologists nor

professionals. These youths, "fundamentally dissatisfied with the values of American society," are the commune drop-outs, the Consciousness III heroes of Reich's Utopia a-borning, and, presumably, the occupants of university buildings. By no means all of them are the children of the affluent middle class.

I should dearly like to believe in Harrington's coalition just as I should sign up immediately for residence in Harrington's socialist society. Unhappily, Harrington's discussion of the politics of his coalition are the least convincing portions of this entire volume. An effective coalition requires shared interests and shared perceptions of those interests. At the least, more must unite than separate the coalition partners.

The exposition lingers longest on the blue-collar workers, in part because unions are Harrington's best hope for social change. The blue-collar workers are not nearly as affluent as some popular legends assert, nor are even prosperous suburban working-class families automatically members of the middle class. Fair enough. The hard questions, scarcely analyzed here, concern the homogeneity of the old working class. How much in common do prosperous, strongly unionized workers have with their more precariously employed, often black colleagues? And even if interests are shared, are they perceived as shared?

For Marxists, these questions have a particularly nasty twist. Rates of exploitation might be constant or even falling in the building trades and the well-disciplined industrial unions. For less well-protected groups, they may be rising. The overall rate of profit for the society at large might represent an averaging of rising and falling rates of exploitation in different sectors of the working class. There are two depressing implications: the rate of profit may not after all be falling, and the working class may divide itself into the prosperous and the poor, an outcome which, incidentally, was foreseen as a possibility by Marx.

To say the least of it, working-class politics are inchoate. What is one to say of a situation in which blue-collar voters treat George Wallace and George McGovern as alternatives and appear uncertain which of the Georges is their first choice? And how does one cope with the unpleasant issue of Vietnam? Justly enough, Harrington notes that AFL-CIO Vietnam hawkishness has disguised for a good many liberal doves the enlightened labor position on economic and racial issues.

As far as it goes, the point is valid. The trouble is that Vietnam symbolizes issues which will divide Harrington's coalition long after American forces leave Indochina. The fact that nearly everyone is by now eager to terminate the war ought not conceal the grave disputes over the reasons for ending the conflict. George Wallace derives support from blue-collar workers who firmly believe that, since we didn't go all out to win the war, the thing to do is to withdraw in disgust, an emotion incited not by

what we have done to the Vietnamese but by what we *failed* to do, drop enough bombs and send enough men to get our own way. The young who reject American values and, less vehemently, much of the new working class, define American Vietnam policy as immoral, and they extend their judgment to American foreign policy in general and the role of the military in American affairs. Until the old working class begins to share these perceptions, the George Wallaces and Richard Nixons are likely to detach a good many patriotic blue-collar voters from their rather notional coalition partners.

It is hard in fact to think of a significant public issue which does not divide the coalition partners. The elderly mines and mills which close because new environmental laws make them too expensive to run cost the jobs essentially of the old working class. Even in more modern industries, the UAW has not led the fight to improve auto safety and the steelworkers have led no campaigns for higher air quality. The immediate burdens of major shifts in defense and environmental policy fall most heavily upon the elements of Harrington's coalition least able to bear them. Those who advocate the changes most vehemently typically suffer least damage from them. What else, a cynic might inquire, is new?

The unions do support better racial policies than many other establishment institutions. Union members, on the other hand, frequently look like racists to their coalition allies because as usual the burdens of integration fall most heavily upon them. Busing for reasons of racial balance affects most acutely families who cannot afford the alternatives of private schools or migration to more favorable public situations. A Richard Nixon or a George Wallace scores points with moderate income homeowners by emphasizing a set of inequities different from those which Harrington cites. The Nixon-Wallace inequities relate to the unfair impact of changing national policies.

These sour comments are not meant to deny the possibility of solutions which unite rather than divide. Jobs can be created to compensate for those lost by a switch to saner defense and foreign policy. The urgent agenda of national need implies a great deal of work by people of exceedingly varied skills. A George McGovern in the White House might shift national priorities in the direction of a larger public sector and more stable employment. Minimum income grants would diminish both insecurity and inequality.

The abstract possibility cannot be confused with immediate political reality. In the House of Labor in the spring of 1972, Hubert Humphrey is the official candidate. In the end, *Socialism* leaves me despondent about the realistic prospects even of advanced social democracy, let alone of the noble vision of socialist equality which moves Michael Harrington.