

Reader's Response

The Assault on Liberalism

Warren Ashby

Brigitte and Peter Berger in their article "The Assault on Class" (*Worldview*, July, 1972) clarify some contemporary complexities with a detailed defense of the thesis that "the assault on racial injustice has, with little notice given it, been turned into an assault on some of the basic presuppositions of the class system." Their attack upon the current strategies for racial justice should not pass without its being noted that their subtle analyses are, in reality, an assault upon liberalism.

The issue is not racial justice. Not only do the Bergers begin and end with a commitment to racial justice, but I know from personal experience of Peter Berger's outrage at injustice and his courageous defense, during his years in the South, of the rights of individuals. Yet in their attack upon movements toward equality of rights the Bergers make dogmatic statements which leave us with only extreme alternatives. The social realities, though not the moral principles, of racial justice are far more complex. In particular the Bergers confuse the purpose and means of present policies; they ignore the moral meaning of class; they present false disjunctions of proscriptive and prescriptive laws, of public and private spheres, of achieved and ascribed status; they portray dire consequences for present policies; and the only positive proposals they present are vague economic goals.

In the attack upon racial policies the Bergers emphasize "school busing for purposes of integration" and "establishing group quotas in certain sectors of employment through government pressure." This is a fundamental failure to distinguish be-

tween ends and means. The court decisions on busing have not been "for purposes of integration" but to protect the rights of individual claimants. One does not have to agree with every lower or Supreme Court decision that makes use of busing as one means of assuring a unitary school system in order to provide for individual rights. But it is difficult to see how anyone who is committed to the Court decision of 1954, that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," and the 1955 ruling, that such inequities be removed "with all deliberate speed," would fail to recognize that in given situations equal rights may be protected by busing. As to the employment quotas established "through government pressure," once more there is that failure to make distinctions. I would not want the task of defending the actions of all members of HEW; and the Bergers may be privy to more government secrets than I. But as one member of a local University Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities, my impression has been that the government is demanding (legitimately, since it is the law) that the university demonstrate that it provides individuals with equal opportunities. In developing an affirmative action program both the committees of the local campus and of the entire university rejected the principle of quotas; and, to my knowledge, the government has insisted upon equal opportunity results, not quotas. In the debates that took place I found myself moving—from moral and not government pressure—to an unexpected, unwanted conclusion. Like the Bergers I have been opposed to quotas. But

when the facts of employment, of remuneration and of rank become clear—from best to worst it is consistently white male, white female, black male, black female—I became convinced that the only way a bureaucracy can be certain to fulfill its recognized obligations is to have specific goals, and that this might mean, for specified time periods, realistic "quotas." Such quotas would exist solely to protect individual rights. That does not mean, as the Bergers seem to imply and as sometimes happens, that unqualified individuals must be employed simply to meet a rigid quota.

All this leads to a confusing inconsistency. Individuals, the Bergers assert, should not be treated solely on the basis of their membership in a group. Agreed. Yet totally rejecting the notion that a woman or a black should receive special privilege through being treated as a member of a group, the Bergers defend the right of a middle-class child to have rights not as an individual but because of class position. What kind of judgment is this that makes class the primary foundation of democratic society?

Part of this disagreement relates to social judgments regarding class rights, part to moral judgments. I had not known, for example, that it was none of the public's business where to educate my child or where my family could live. My experience has been that long since parents were not only told where their children should go to school but that they must attend school. And the zoning laws (some of which may prove to be unconstitutional) effectively tell most persons where they may not live. Moreover, any parent knows (as surely as sociologists know) that as much as we might try, children cannot be preserved "from situations in which they might risk physical harm or in which they might acquire attitudes or habits contrary to the family's life style."

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The Bergers do not say that children can be so preserved, but they defend the rights of parents to use class position to "shield their children from the social and cultural realities of lower-class life." There follows a listing of such realities: "physical violence, high incidence of crime and hard drugs and, more generally, the prevalence of cultural attitudes uncongenial to a middle-class way of life." (The exclusive listing of negative realities makes one wonder whether, originally conceived in economic terms, "lower-class" now implies an implicit value judgment among sociologists.) Surely there are valuable qualities to be found among many in the economically/culturally deprived classes: familial loyalty, a strength in interpersonal relations, a work ethic, an aspiration to better one's lot—these are well known. The Bergers do make an accurate point here: The opposition to busing among middle-class parents is not solely a question of race, and many persons opposed to busing are not racists. But if the opposition is based upon the reasons asserted—"the class antagonisms that would be there in any case," antagonisms built upon incomplete, distorted views of "lower-class realities"—its roots are the same as racist roots. This is the human tendency toward the deification of one's self or class or race. I can see that tendency in myself as in others, but I see no reason why it should be implicitly defended when it exists in relation to class and attacked in relation to race. Nor can I understand why a social policy should be explicitly built upon the false judgments of my middle-class prejudices or my middle-class neighbors.

The situation regarding busing and public housing and equal employment programs is, in fact, far more complex than the Bergers' interpretations, and they are thus led to neat, complete and false disjunctions between law by proscription and prescription, the public and private spheres, achieved and ascribed status. There is something to say in all these areas, but crucially important elements are omitted. Life can-

not be so neatly categorized, though all of us like simple categories. In terms of proscribed and prescribed law, for example, does the recent minimum wage law proscribe an employer from paying under \$2.25 an hour or prescribe that he must pay \$2.25 or more? Too simple an example, it will be said: Laws regarding race are far more complex. Granted. But when it is accepted as a principle that segregated schools are inherently discriminatory and public officials are told to stop discrimination, it is overly subtle to say that the law does not prescribe integration, it only proscribes segregation. "With all deliberate speed" may mean deliberate, but if, after ten and fifteen years, schools in the presumably same system are still segregated, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, there is surely nothing inconsistent in the courts saying, in effect, that "deliberate speed" may have been a valid means for the fifties and sixties but "speed" is valid for the seventies. To say that the courts have moved from proscription to prescription seems misleading.

Similar complexities and difficulties exist with achieved and ascribed status, with the public and private spheres. The distinctions are, as the Bergers insist, important, and liberals will want to maintain them in some senses. But the dichotomies will not hold still. The achieved status of any individual is not just achieved but is the result of many ascriptions which make possible, and interact with, the achievements. So the dynamics of the class system cannot be understood, as claimed, in terms of the principle of achieved status. At least the experience of Yale, Harvard and Princeton students (as well as university graduates generally) belies such understanding. They may contribute to class dynamics through achieved status, but that status has been largely dependent upon the interacting ascribed statuses. Societies necessarily ascribe status in various ways to their members; but what is not clear is why it should be permissible for a democratic society to allow economic and cultural privilege and

middle-class parents to ascribe status to its members but not to develop alternative modes.

Similarly, the dichotomy between the public and private spheres is extreme. The distinctions exist. They have been, and will be, fought over in terms of competing social philosophies. But no definitions can neatly mark out these distinctions. The Bergers' insistence that there are fundamental differences between life's spheres, public and private, is helpful as a normative ideal but does not demonstrate that present policies violate the ideal in irremediable ways.

Much of their concern for the assault on class seems to arise from their uncertainty about the future scenario that leads to dire predictions of movement toward a totalitarian, bureaucratic society if there is the persistence in present racial policies in education, housing and employment. It is hard to understand why sociologists should be so troubled by uncertainties regarding future scenarios. If historians cannot accurately predict the future, should sociologists be any better soothsayers?

Somehow, unlike the Bergers, I am not afraid of bureaucracy, even though (perhaps like them) I spend much of my time trapped in its mazes. The reason for this lack of fear is probably not so much the recognition that in the modern world the stability of institutions depends upon bureaucracies as upon the fact that I, too, am a minor bureaucrat. The limitations of diffused bureaucratic power in a democracy are, therefore, quite plain. Again, the Bergers, in asserting that "the aforementioned policies will continue to be frustrated," live in a different society than I. In the South we know what frustrations are. There have been frustrations enough since 1954 (or should that be 1863 or 1776 or 1650 or the fifth or eighth centuries B.C.)? But my impression is that there has been more successful desegregation of schools, largely due to busing without court orders, in the past two years than in all previous history and that there is a developing equality of opportunity in

employment for women and individuals in minority groups. Individuals who rebel and resist now, as in the past, are featured in the press; but the real news for the future is being made by countless individuals who, cooperating with others, are voluntarily responding to new enforcement demands for equal rights. This widespread response is the fruit of liberal policies; for, as K. T. Hobhouse asserted: "The heart of liberalism is the understanding that progress is not a matter of mechanical contrivance, but of the liberation of living spiritual energy. Good mechanism is that which provides the channels wherein such energy can flow unimpeded, unobstructed by its own exuberance of output, vivifying the social structure, expanding and ennobling the life of the mind."

So the Bergers and I see the federal policies in relation to schools, scattered housing and equal employment differently. They, as a bad mechanism which threatens to destroy the essential class basis of American democracy. And I, as a mechanism that is liberating the "living spiritual energy" of many individuals, enabling them to come to grips with unprecedented demands of democracy today. The Bergers may be right. Moreover, they may not be able to excuse my sociological misconceptions that still cannot comprehend class in the way they define it, as the basis of democracy. Perhaps they will forgive me if, in relation to their defense of the class *status quo* and their final vague appeals for exclusively economic programs to deal with racial injustice, I say their arguments sound like conversations I have heard around Southern dinner tables ever since I was a boy. Those conversations have often been, and still are, with white middle-class folk "with impeccable liberal credentials." They too are my friends. They may be right today, but they have been consistently wrong in the past in always recommending that something else be done.

Several years ago in our area school busing became an issue, and some of my genuinely liberal friends were saying once more: "It's going

to destroy the public schools." The sky has not fallen and the schools are still here. And what is most important, for all the intractable problems—some racial, some not, yet all complicated by race—we (at least in our section of the country) are living in an incomparably freer, more equal and decent society than a generation ago. For that we have to thank the blacks, the bureaucracies of the Federal government—courts, legislature and executive agencies—and

The Bergers Respond

Warren Ashby argues for the current liberal positions with intelligence, verve and a deeply felt sense of urgency regarding the problems of social injustice. It would be nice if we could agree with him. He is very much one of the "good guys" (we say this with genuine respect), and we would like nothing better than to give aid and comfort to the "good guys." Unfortunately our vocation as sociologists often makes it necessary to caution instead of applaud.

We do not doubt that the ends envisaged by the courts and by agencies of the Federal government are to protect the rights of individuals. But means have a way of becoming autonomous of the ends, and even actions undertaken for the most praiseworthy motives have unintended consequences. It is the latter that concern us in our article. In the present situation we believe that the rhetoric of ends tends to mystify the real results of the means. The mystification becomes painfully obvious in the language by which current policies are described, as when the government tells us that it is asking for "goals," not "quotas."

Ashby seems to think that we greatly admire the class system and are primarily concerned with its preservation. This is not so. We are well aware of its inequities and ambiguities and as eager as he is to do something about its grosser affronts to justice. But we are also aware of the positive values embodied (however imperfectly) in this system, par-

those persons in and out of professional positions who have faced up to the demands of democratic equality. With such provincial Southern experience perhaps it is not surprising that I cannot share the respect for many "white middle-class parents with impeccable liberal credentials" nor the fears of what will happen if the Federal government pursues policies promoting equal individual rights in education, housing and employment.

ticularly the values of individual merit and individual options. More important, we believe that it is bad logic to pursue social policies that ignore important social realities—and class is, and will likely remain, one of the most important realities of American society. We are willing to live with this fact and to think about policies in terms of the parameters it dictates. The alternative would be a revolution that we regard as both undesirable and improbable.

It is curious that Ashby reproaches us for making guesses about the future, when the policies he supports were based on the wildest guesses, which, every day now, are being shown to have been erroneous ones. Thus there was the manifestly erroneous guess that racial integration per se would bring about positive educational results. All of us, whatever our position, must guess about the future. Making policy means to jump into the unknown. When important values are at stake it seems morally plausible to us that one jumps with caution.

Ashby puts his finger on what is probably the sharpest underlying difference between his position and ours: He is not afraid of bureaucracy; we are. With all due recognition of his geographical location south of the Mason-Dixon line, does he really want to stick to this statement? In the second half of the twentieth century? Yes indeed, we are very much afraid of bureaucracy. Sociologists may not know

the future; all of us are in a position to examine the past. It is Ashby's insouciance about the growth of state power (and this after years of *liberal* rhetoric on the "military-industrial complex"!) that most clearly places him in the liberal camp.

To the extent that this insouciance is at the very heart of liberal ideology and politics in America today, we plead guilty to the charge that our article is an assault on liberalism.

We are not interested in making fine sociological points. We *are* inter-

ested in the designing of policies that will attack social injustice without disrupting the fabric of society. We can think of no better partners in this enterprise than those who share Warren Ashby's moral and human engagement.

The Ethnic Connection

Michael Novak

Thinkers are not disembodied spirits. Neither are they atomic individuals. Thinkers are both *embodied* and also *socialized*. These are the main premises of "the new ethnicity."

Richard Neuhaus, as evidence his article "Going Home Again: America After Vietnam" in the October issue of *Worldview*, does not understand the new ethnicity, precisely because he is so thoroughly entrapped in "the old ethnicity" of his own variety.

Is it uninformative that his favorite stream of philosophy and theology is German?

Is it uninformative that the image of "civil religion" to which he would invite us is, so precisely, Protestant—as if the immigrants, the Spanish-speaking, the Indians, the Jews and others had made no modification of the American project?

Is it uninformative that his favorite metaphor for America is one that leaves countless millions absolutely cold—namely, "covenant"? (I do not accept the ideology that America is a "covenanted nation.")

Is it uninformative that his understanding of law and Gospel, as he himself suggests, is Lutheran?

Richard Neuhaus, like every other human, is an ethnic thinker. He is not universal. His thoughts do not speak for all. What marks him as a participant in "the old ethnicity" is that he is so naively unconscious of the narrowness of his own consciousness.

Each assertion that he makes about *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* in his recent article is un-

happily erroneous, and the pattern of his errors is identifiable:

1. Neuhaus fails to see that the target of my polemic is neither the WASP nor the intellectual but rather, more accurately, the "superculture"—the new class that believes in uniculture and believes it has escaped ethnic consciousness.

Traditional WASP culture has been just as victimized by superculture as any other ethnic culture. So has genuine intellectual life. Missing that point, Neuhaus misconstrues my whole book.

2. He says I was "impressed" by Kevin Phillips's book. I reviewed that book when it appeared. I detest the resentment which is its inner drive. I have argued consistently during my entire career that the lower-middle-class white yearns for a progressive politics and is conservative only by default.

3. I never thought that Muskie was an ethnic candidate. He was long ago cut adrift from authentic ethnic consciousness. He presented himself in 1972 as an ambivalent blend of Yankee and repressed Polishness (his "testiness," his slow steadiness).

The clearly ethnic candidate in this election is the Scotch-Irish Methodist, George McGovern. He has had difficulty communicating to virtually every other ethnic group. He is an authentic, self-conscious participant in his own ethnicity.

4. As virtually everyone agrees now, the election of 1972 will be de-

cided precisely where I was among the first to say it would: in the urban Catholic ethnic neighborhoods of ten key states. Through blindness, mistakes and unconscious insults, the McGovern team systematically alienated that progressive, restless ethnic vote and, by September, had driven it in unparalleled fashion into the arms of Richard Nixon. Herculean efforts on George McGovern's part since early September may or may not be sufficient to turn the tide.

But the issue raised by *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* lies far deeper than 1972. It concerns the whole tide of American politics since at least 1960 (when I first began to write about it); the tide will have effects for decades. The instincts of white ethnics are, and have been, powerfully progressive, especially in economic issues. These are the instincts for which many of us now struggle to give political expression.

5. I spent the whole summer of 1970 with Sargent Shriver, working on behalf of Congressional candidates, helping in a campaign in direct *defiance* of Scammon and Wattenberg.

6. Neuhaus speaks of "ethnic passions and prejudices" without examining his own. That is a traditional attitude toward Southern and East-

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