Parties: The Real Opportunity for Effective Citizen Politics
by John S. Saloma III and Frederick H. Sontag
(Knopf; 390+xix pp.; $7.95)

Gerald M. Pomper

One of the remaining hopeful aspects of American public life is the attention being given today to political parties. Intellectuals now recognize the vital function parties perform in connecting the individual citizen to government. This is in contrast to a long-standing "progressive" attitude of contempt for parties and politicians. More significant may be the attention that writings about the parties are receiving from practicing politicians. Even the consciously anti-intellectual Nixon Administration has molded its tactics to fit the prescriptions of a series of analysts, such as Kevin Phillips, Richard Scammon and Walter DeVries.

The latest contribution to the new literature is a collaboration of academician John Saloma and publicist Frederick Sontag. Parties, as the subtitle states, sees the political organizations as "the best potential means for achieving broad citizen participation in politics and continuing citizen influence in the direction of government." From this unexamined premise there follows a detailed examination of the present American party system and a grab bag of proposals for reform.

There are two major themes in Parties. The first is an analysis, highly critical in tone, of the present state of the nation's politics. Saloma and Sontag detail the unrepresentative character of the parties' national committees, the lack of congressional responsiveness, the inefficiency of party organizations, the inability of the parties to provide government personnel and the hurried procedures of the national conventions. Because of their failures, the parties threaten to be replaced by new agencies, such as the mass media and professional campaign consultants. In these sections the authors ably summarize a large amount of professional literature but add nothing original.

The major theme of the book concerns party reform. Each chapter here is climaxed by a series of recommendations to increase citizen involvement in, and control of, the parties. The authors are inspired by such examples as the McGovern-Fraser and O'Hara commissions of the Democratic Party, public-interest law firms, Ralph Nader, and Common Cause and other groups. Their ultimate goal appears to be something like the Democratic reform movement of New York, with some additional features, such as the ideological zeal of the Goldwater partisans of 1964 and the mass financing of the Wallace campaign of 1972.

These changes are necessary, the authors believe, if the United States is to overcome the alienation of its citizens and the trends toward a bureaucratic technocracy. They base their hopes on the development of an "educated mass" of leisureed, white-collar, politically interested and affluent men and women of postindustrial society. And they foresee the effects of new technology: computers to make possible universal registration and direct-mail campaigns; cable television to allow a vast increase in two-way political communication, including "electronic town meetings"; new polling techniques to permit simulated campaigns and the rational choice of strategies.

The broad reforms proposed here cannot be easily summarized. A sampling: the questioning of presidential candidates by the convention; expansion of the national committees to make them more representative of state populations and of demographic groups; permanent party policy commissions; frequent congressional party caucuses; task forces to recruit candidates for both parties in all districts; a national institute of politics to train political executives; cooperative fund-raising among citizens groups; publication of a national political digest; citizen participation in cable television; cooperative use of campaign consultants; medical examinations for party candidates; and wage checkoffs for political contributions.

Proposals of this sort may mark the future development of America's parties, at least of the Democrats. Shortly after Parties' publication, the Democratic convention took major steps which happened to coincide with the book's recommendations. Most liberals will support proposals toward open parties, membership accountability and deliberative procedures. American politics would be closer to democratic ideals if Saloma and Sontag's advice were taken, and this catalog of desirable reforms is a valuable guide to all interested citizens.

Yet the book lacks a vital element—a clear indication of the purpose of party reform. There is no discernible theory of what a political party is or should be, and consequently it is difficult to appraise any specific proposal. Parties, we are told, should be democratic. But democratic to what end?

At various points in this study, participation appears to be an end in itself. The authors recommend, for example, that convention delegates maintain twenty-four-hour telephone contact with their local committees and that attendance in the public galleries of the convention be rotated among visitors. But these forms of participation can only be ritualistic; their advocacy raises doubt about the general efficacy of participation.

The true, ultimate, purpose of reform is substantive, not procedural,
but Saloma and Sontag seem to regard procedural change as sufficient. There is hardly any mention of the policy consequences of party behavior and structure. Thus, in discussing Congress, the conservative effects of the committee system are not considered. Although it is suggested that appointees to committees be screened for “competence,” they do not propose that congressmen be screened for their policy views. Even party leaders, Saloma and Sontag suggest, “would be evaluated less in terms of their support or loyalty to a written party program than in terms of actual political performance and party due process.” Surely such proposals emphasize form over content.

Even if we accept the goal of procedural reform as an ultimate objective, we can doubt its feasibility. Few people are moved to political action by an unanchored interest in open caucuses or annual budget reports. Rather, it is substantive demands that bring procedural changes. The discontent with American politics was engendered by racism and Vietnam, not party rules. The reforms in the Democratic Party came because activists wished to end the war and achieve other policies. Without such policy issues, party reform is unlikely.

The critical issue here is that of the incentives to political activity. What will induce citizens to fit the Saloma-Sontag outline? In traditional parties, activity was encouraged by patronage, contracts and what these authors call “the power motive.” They suggest no new incentive for their citizen politicians other than a vague “demand for governmental competence and performance.” Will this really be sufficient to encourage citizens to campaign, contribute, recruit, program computers to address envelopes and do the other hundreds of jobs involved in politics, and to do so for years on end? Policy goals are the only observable alternative incentives, but these are given little attention.

While Saloma and Sontag note regretfully that “the political landscape is littered with the bleached skeletons of citizen endeavors,” they have failed to consider the basic reasons for these repeated defeats. Their vision of the parties’ future is therefore attractive but incomplete.

That vision must include not only a roadmap of the routes to Utopia but also a guidebook to the new City of God.

The Party of Eros:
Radical Social Thought
and the Realm of Freedom
by Richard King
(University of North Carolina Press; 227 pp.; $7.50)

Daniel M. Ogilvie

The appearance of the book The Party of Eros, or one like it, in spring, 1975, was predictable. The time was ripe for a review of the ideas of scholarly heroes who had provided the intellectual and philosophical groundwork that had been molded into explanations for felt dissatisfaction of youths and reasons for social protest in the 1960’s. It was time to say that these writers not only had personal histories but also intellectual forebears and that basic faults of logic or theoretical omissions could be located somewhere in the writings of each.

Richard King singled out Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman and Norman O. Brown for concentrated critical review. Before that task was undertaken, Mr. King reconstructed a portion of the history of radical social thought in America during this century. This chapter, the book’s first, is King’s most original contribution and reveals an enviable level of scholarship that remains essentially intact throughout the remaining chapters.

Special emphasis is placed on Dwight Macdonald’s Politics, a journal published from 1944 to 1949 that sought to find a “third way.” No friends of New Deal liberalism or Stalinist communism, MacDonald and his contributing authors, including Goodman, tried but mostly failed to find their way to a convincing description of happier alternatives for American society. The