

A Time to Think

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The American Left helped win some extraordinary battles during the 1960's and early 1970's. All it lost was the war.

Its two most important achievements during that period are obvious enough. The Left made a significant contribution, in militancy as well as theory, to a civil rights movement which swept away the juridical system of Jim Crow (even though the economic infrastructure of racism was left pretty much intact). And it provided activists and ideas to the teach-ins, the marches, and the political campaigns of 1968 and 1972 which turned American opinion around on the issue of Vietnam. There were other victories: for example, the destruction of the doctrine of *in loco parentis* on the American campus; the delegitimizing of the House Un-American Activities Committee; participation in a woman's movement which is still demonstrating great vitality and potential; the opening up of the Democratic Party to entire new constituencies.

And yet at the end of ten or more years of such activity the campus is apathetic and largely unorganized, the millions who joined in the antiwar demonstrations have retreated from public ills to private problems, and there is still no major socialist organization in this country which is relevant to the political concerns of American working people. I exaggerate, to be sure. The reform forces within the structure of the Democratic Party are much better situated today than they were during the crusading enthusiasms of 1967-68. And the change in the consciousness of the young will, paradoxically, assert itself politically only as they get older.

Still, the bleak fact remains: Out of all the ferment of the sixties there did not emerge a serious and

organized socialist Left. That dispiriting reality does, however, have one happy consequence. It has made possible a certain fraternity, a possibility of friendly discussion, on the Left. In the sixties and early seventies a movement dedicated to community became internally isolationist, and there were even violent confrontations between the champions of different roads to brotherhood. In part that happened because there was a mobilization mentality, and perfectly legitimate differences on strategy and tactics were seen as betrayals on the battlefield.

Now that things are unfortunately calmer there is time to think; the survivors can talk to one another and, in a surprising number of cases, discover how much they have in common. It is one of the many merits of Peter Clecak's new book, *Radical Paradoxes: Dilemmas of the American Left: 1945-1970* (Harper & Row; 358 pp.; \$11.95), that it is part of this new mood. And even though I have my disagreements with Clecak's analysis, I hope that I will express them in the same spirit of dialogue in which he writes. Moreover, I share a crucial value premise with Clecak: I, too, share the work of analysis with the aim of better understanding how to build the democratic socialist movement which America so desperately needs.

Clecak's description of the conditions which make radical life so paradoxical in America is depressing and accurate. "We are," he writes, "a divided nation, apparently unable to resolve our multiple social crises, yet powerful enough to threaten the very survival of mankind in the quest to preserve the essential features of the current social order. And we have a relatively small, divided Left, thus far politically powerless to alter substantially either the domestic or international course of the country." Thus, "in the quarter century following World War II, the overwhelming powerlessness to achieve intermediate or long-range socialist ends has made every theoretical resolution of the general form of radical para-

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doxes politically unsatisfactory; and this disparity between social aims and social realities, rather than admittedly important lapses in theory, defective visions, and fratricidal 'politics,' largely accounts for the marginal impact of the Left on American life."

In another mood Clecak puts more of an emphasis upon those "admittedly important lapses in theory" of the American Left. The "plain Marxists" (who will be defined shortly) saw that the working class in this country is not playing its assigned, revolutionary role, but despite the failure of their search for a surrogate proletariat (among the youth, in Cuba, China, etc.), they stressed the most mythic elements of Marxism, the vision of a world in which alienation is completely transcended. This assertion of the Marxian millennium by people unable to develop an adequate strategy for tomorrow morning "amounted to a classic quasi-religious form of world rejection."

There is considerable truth in this analysis. For my purposes let me reduce its complexity and focus on two aspects of the situation which I think crucial: the questions of American tactics and of defining the Communist reality. *First*, how does one act politically in the only advanced industrial nation in the world without a socialist working class? *Second*, how does one relate, politically and theoretically, to that one-third of the globe which proclaims itself "socialist"? These are, I believe, the two axes of differentiation which have configured the Left for at least a generation.

There is no *necessary* interrelationship between the two issues. The Communist Party, under the leadership of Earl Browder in the thirties and forties, combined an absolute, slavish, and uncritical identification with the Soviet Union with a (very successful) strategy of operating as the Communist—or "progressive"—wing of the New Deal coalition. And indeed there are still a considerable number of people who have something like this outlook. But if the American and Communist questions are not inextricably linked, there are usually connections linking a person's (a movement's) attitude toward them. It is, for example, of a piece that Paul Sweezy has over the years maintained that reality is fulfilling the traditionally Marxian expectations (first in Russia, then in China) and has also championed an equally traditionalist opposition to collaborating with liberal reformism in the United States.

I propose, then, to take these two defining issues and to relate them to Clecak's analysis of a Left which failed because the American environment was so hostile to it (the "objective" explanation) and because at least some of its leaders reacted to an impossible situation by adopting impossibilist demands (the "subjective" factor).

First of all there is the issue of communism. As that question is now posed it

is not primarily political. At the height of the cold war one's view of communism often meant choosing sides for the East or West. That is not the case today. Almost the entire Left (with the rather negligible exception of some right-wing socialists who have become evangelists for Jay Lovestone's cold warriorism) is in favor of détente. There are, to be sure, differences within that consensus, particularly with regard to the Middle East and Soviet Jewry, but there is a consensus. Moreover, outside of the Communist Party, Russian communism has very few friends on the American Left. There is a fascination with Mao, and not a little sympathy for his regime. But it has not had much of an impact on the chief political issue in this area, the Sino-American détente (or rather, Nixon's visit to Peking was, if anything, disquieting to those who see that city as the Fourth Rome).

But what, then, is the point of assigning such importance to a question which is primarily theoretical? Isn't it simply a reflex of my own monomania on this subject to put it up front in a review-article? I think not. For the issue of communism bears mightily on one's conception of socialism (not to mention one's view of the Third World). If it cannot be discussed—on the grounds that any systematically negative analysis of communism encourages "Red-baiting"—then socialism itself cannot be discussed.

This problem surfaces in Clecak's conception of the "plain Marxists." In discussing C. Wright Mills—to my mind the most important of the Left thinkers he discusses—he comments that Mills's "plain Marxism" "freed him from the simplifications of anti-Stalinist intellectuals who found contemporary forms of socialism wanting by measuring every historical manifestation against the ideals of Victorian Marxism." As I understand it, the ideal of "Victorian Marxism" in this case is the assertion of the indissoluble link between socialism and democracy (that, as Marx put it to the First International, the task of the emancipation of the working class belongs to the working class alone). So Clecak's sympathy to Mills and his critical attitude toward Irving Howe (or, on this question, toward me) is of a piece with his minimum definition of "socialism as public ownership under some form of planning. . . ." In this perspective, minimal socialism is "not inherently incompatible with reasonable versions of the larger political and moral aims of socialism. In fact, it is the precondition, the indispensable substratum, of a mature socialism."

So there can be a minimal socialism which is authoritarian or even totalitarian. It will not automatically evolve toward democratic socialism (or the communism of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need"). Clecak is quite perceptive in criticizing that rather mechanistic view of the social process as it appeared, say, in the writings of Paul Sweezy during his pro-So-

vict phase. And he is emphatic that "a fully developed socialism must be democratic." He simply insists that, in this manifestly imperfect world, one accept the possibility that the public ownership and planning of Communist society may well be a first step toward that mature, and democratic, socialism. For Clecak the anti-Stalinist intellectuals (and again I must warn the reader that I am an interested participant in that group) are dogmatic on this point. They refuse to revise the Marxian theory, to abandon "the ideals of Victorian Marxism," so as to be able to confront new, socialistic but antidemocratic social forms not dreamed of in the philosophy of the founding father.

Clecak's view is persuasively and well worked out, and I share the values which underlie it. I simply disagree with it. And my difference, as I hope I can explain, is important, not simply to Marxologues, but to the American, and world, Left. If socialists simultaneously engage in a careless and even sentimental revisionism with regard to communism while maintaining a purist orthodoxy in their attitude toward America, they will not simply open themselves up to a charge of double-standardism; they will also degrade their methodology and misread both the blocs.

In the Marxian view the transition to socialism would be an unprecedented event. The emergence of every other social system was part of an unconscious process. The burghers of the late Middle Ages were not aiming at a bourgeois revolution. They wanted to make more money, which led them to revolutionary actions. Because this was the case, they did not understand the very society which they themselves created. They viewed it as guided by an invisible hand which regularly punished, not simply the workers, but members of the ruling class as well. And they developed a profound interest in their own ignorance of the economy which they dominated, for the truth would reveal the embarrassing and interrelated facts of its mortality and irrationality.

In contrast, the socialist revolution would be conscious. This is not a matter of some Victorian ideal. It follows from Marx's sociological and economic premises: that a majority movement of the propertyless would politically impose its priorities on the new society. If I can use a basically misleading image which does work in this case, for the first time in human history the superstructure would determine the base. Now one can argue that events since Marx's day have proved that such a society is impossible. There is certainly a respectable argument to be made for that position. But neither Clecak nor I accept it. If, however, one still asserts that it is possible for the propertyless majority (propertyless in the sense of not owning the means of production) to shape their own destiny, then democracy is part

of the "base" of socialism, not a detail of the superstructure which can be added some time after the economic base is created.

Rosa Luxemburg was one Marxist who understood this point brilliantly. She attacked Eduard Bernstein's theory that socialism was developing, gradually, bit by bit (partly through cooperatives) within the capitalist society. Bernstein, she noted, wrote as if the socialist revolution would follow the model of the bourgeois revolution: an evolutionary maturation within the old order. But, she concluded, precisely because the socialist revolution was to be made by a conscious majority, its very first act was the conquest of political power by that majority.

All this, it seems to me, is not a matter of "Victorian ideals" but of hard-headed analysis of the economic and political preconditions for a socialist society. That Communist societies are laying the material foundations for socialism in the sense that they are building up the forces of production is, of course, true; but so then are dynamic capitalist nations like Japan and South Africa. In Paul Sweezy's first paradigm (and in the writings of Isaac Deutscher) it was asserted that the expansion of the Soviet economy would inevitably set in motion tendencies toward democratic socialism. The totalitarian brutalities of the regime, it was argued, were simply a consequence of its poverty. But then Sweezy himself realized that his expectations were not working out and decided that the Soviet Union was a repressive, class society. Clecak is excellent in outlining this intellectual evolution, and he is rightly critical of the mechanistic simplifications which were behind it. But Clecak does not ask himself if Sweezy's very definition of socialism, which is the same as Clecak's, did not dispose him toward a rather basic political error.

I stress this point for a political reason. It is certainly true, as C. Wright Mills, among others, pointed out, that centralization, stratification, and planning are characteristic of *all* regimes in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, I would say that, if the world does not blow itself up during the next twenty-five years, every society in it will have a large measure of public ownership and state planning. But this is by no means the same as saying that every society will be socialist. If, as Marx once remarked, the most important means of socialist production is the working class, it is extremely dangerous, politically and analytically, to omit such a crucial factor from one's socialist equation. An unthinking, greedy construction of the material base for capitalism could lead to a bourgeois society the bourgeoisie did not understand. Not so with socialism.

Moreover, a failure to understand this point can lead to substituting new illusions for old, i.e., China for Russia. China is a distant, enormously complex society. One of the reasons that Sweezy, Baran, and other thinkers on the Left can switch their allegiance from Moscow to Peking is—and I hope I am not being

too harsh—that no one really knows much of what is going on in China. None of the main periods since Mao's triumph of 1949—the Great Leap Forward, the retreat of 1959, the Cultural Revolution of the mid-sixties, and now, perhaps, a new cultural revolution in the form of the anti-Confucius campaign—were predicted. What is more, despite the egalitarian and antibureaucratic ideology of some of these periods, there is no reliable evidence that there was a spontaneous surge from below, from the masses. The Cultural Revolution was turned off about as quickly as it was turned on.

That is not to ignore the enormous differences between the Soviet Union and China, both economically and culturally. It is to say that it would be tragic if important sections of the American Left repeated the un-Marxian methodology of the old Russian delusion, i.e., analyzing and evaluating a society in terms of what it says about itself. That could lead once again to a flawed definition of socialism itself and to a distorted picture of the balance of forces in the globe.

So I think that Clecak, though he is a shrewd and accurate critic of many of the illusions to be found in Sweezy, Baran, Marcuse, and even Mills, is not sufficiently aware of the degree to which he shares a fundamental, and dangerous, assumption with the thinkers he analyzes: that mere public ownership and planning constitute socialism, that democracy can come later. That is not a scholarly point, a matter of Victorian ideals. It concerns one's ability to distinguish the counterposed forms of an inevitable collectivism in the modern world. It fails to comprehend one of the most crucial truths of the next epoch in human experience: that the "superstructure" (in the sense of the political direction of the economy) is becoming a crucial element of the base.

But one last political point on this issue. I hold to the analysis I have just outlined (and I have developed it at length elsewhere, most thoroughly in my *Socialism*). But I do not think that the differences which I have with Clecak should in any way inhibit cooperation or even membership in a joint organization. There are those who belong to the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, of which I am National Chairperson, who have Clecak's view. We have agreed to disagree amicably, and to discuss this theoretical issue, insisting only upon unanimity in opposing any Communist attack on freedom, i.e., the harassment of dissidents, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, etc. One can come to such political conclusions from Clecak's point of view or from mine, and since he and I belong to that relatively tiny American minority, the democratic socialists, we should act together and discuss at our leisure.

The second issue which has bedeviled the American Left has to do with the pe-

culiarities of this society, the only advanced industrial economy in the world without a socialist working class and a mass socialist party. Here I find myself in substantial agreement with Clecak.

In C. Wright Mills's writings of the early and mid-fifties, as Clecak summarizes them, Mills "identified the development of the power élite and the parallel growth of mass society as the primary structural causes of the collapse of liberalism in America. At the top, the main national problems were defined and resolved by élites. At middle levels of power, a balance of publics neutralized each other. And at the bottom, a passive mass society ideologically molded by the 'cultural apparatus' was taking on an ill-defined shape: powerful but immoral élites, declining publics, and impotent masses summarized the condition and direction of America at midcentury."

That is an excellent reading of Mills's view. It reveals its strengths and also its limitations. For although Mills was reacting against the pluralist and consensus theories of the American celebration of the fifties, he obviously absorbed some of their attitudes. They rejoiced in popular passivity; he excoriated it; but both assumed it. There is not much in the Mills analysis that prepares one for the great black mass movement of the sixties, for the cultural revolution, or for the antiwar campaign. Moreover, Mills, like almost all the other "plain Marxists," wrongly wrote off the organized American working class. But if there were flaws in the Millsian view, he was always probing for Archimedian points, for the possibility of moving society and the world. That is not true of Marcuse or of Sweezy and Baran. In Marcuse's technologically deterministic pessimism there is an occasional romantic hope of an alliance between the underclass and the cultural rebels, but it has little political relevance. And in the Sweezy-Baran model of Monopoly Capitalism there is no sense of the possibilities for change that exist within the interstices of the society.

Clecak writes, and I agree heartily, that one must have a "criterion of political eligibility" when talking about what is politically possible. "Here the relatively small though important band of the wide spectrum of proposed measures that may be realized through political activity would meet at least one basic condition—they cannot entail the dissolution of the American corporate structure. Although the criterion of political eligibility illuminates no more than the *potential* future space and adaptability of advanced capitalist society, it seems preferable as a point of departure to Baran and Sweezy's geometric projection of the worst of past and present performances."

Clecak is also quite right to note that Baran and Sweezy's book explicitly omits discussion of the role of the working class or the nature of work. "Having consciously put these considerations to the side,

Baran and Sweezy should also have refrained from indulging in massive, unqualified generalizations about the fate of American society." But what, then, about the working class? I fear that Clecak shares the attitude of the people whom he so cogently criticizes on other counts when it comes to this issue. Objectively, the blue-collar workers stand in the need of basic structural change: They lost 3 per cent in real purchasing power last year, their children are being allowed to go to college at that precise moment when a bachelor's degree has been (economically at least) devalued down to a high-school diploma, and so on. For that matter, the government publication *Social Indicators* reminded us earlier this year that the bottom 80 per cent of Americans own 24 per cent of their society, while the top 20 per cent own 76 per cent (the bottom 20 per cent possess two-tenths of 1 per cent).

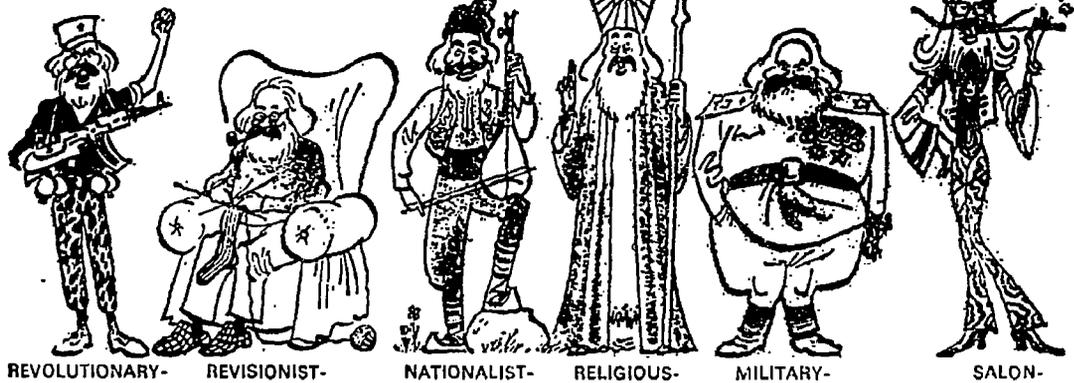
But as the McGovern campaign and other recent events demonstrate, there is no automatic link between objective need and subjective action. Considerations of culture, religion, lifestyle, and the like mediate the class experience. It is unlikely that, as Kevin Phillips hopes, the blue-collar working class can become a permanent component of a Republican Party which is the chosen instrument of big business. But it is also possible that it will not enter once again into an alliance with the college-educated forces of reform. Under those conditions

one might see the breakdown of the American party system: a radical realignment into a nonaligned period of American politics in which there is no stable majority coalition of any kind. That situation, I think, is ready-made for an authoritarian demagogue.

But if there is a possibility of activating those possibilities which Clecak defines, it requires that the working class be a part of it. From this perspective I would define the crucial role of the Left in the coming period as one of building bridges between the "old" (one generation old) elements of the Rooseveltian coalition (the Meany unionists, the traditional liberals) and the new constituencies (the women, the graduates of mass higher education, the alumni of the antiwar movement, the politically organized minorities, the Democratic Party reformers). To do that, and to educate the need for basic change, for socialist change, may well be an impossible task. It is, however, the task on the agenda of the Left.

And whatever my criticisms of Clecak's book, it will help in orienting us toward that agenda. It is written in a fair, judicious, and undogmatic style with intelligence and perception. Since the American Left is now forced to make another new beginning, that is a hopeful portent that we might be able to build a movement for fraternal consciousness on fraternity and consciousness!

A SMALL GALLERY OF MARXISTS:



REVOLUTIONARY- REVISIONIST- NATIONALIST- RELIGIOUS- MILITARY- SALON-



NEO- BLACK-POWER- VULGAR- PSEUDO- TRUE- AND FALSE- (OR VICE VERSA)