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The Decline of American Radicalism in the Twentieth Century

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EXISTING THEORIES on the failure of American socialism in the 20th century provide ample opportunity for American society to indulge in self-congratulation, and this perhaps explains why no one has defined a truly satisfactory view of the problem. The absorption of third party platforms by major parties, the economic prosperity of a society that met the economic grievances that led to the formation of socialist parties in other nations, the consensual, Lockean basis of an American liberalism which was broad enough to accept the demands of the left, the religious and racial conservatism of the American workers, social mobility, or limited trade union job consciousness—all these generally accepted interpretations have permitted a narrower view than is justified of the nature of the historical context in which American radicalism failed. If each has some merit, their collective thesis by-passes a somewhat less attractive possibility that American socialism failed partly because of its own internal life and ideology, but primarily because in crucial respects American society and politics in the 20th century have also failed in a world wracked by war and

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repression. Indeed, given the cataclysmic nature of a great part of the century, tepid views of the demise of socialism avoid the tenor of the period by ignoring the relationship of the failure of organized American socialism to the failure not just of American politics and diplomacy, but also to the intellectual and political collapse of the left everywhere in the Western world. It is worth considering some of the internal and external causes of the decline of American radicalism.

The intellectual and political heritage of Marxism did not prepare the left in America and Europe for the complexities of the 20th century, if only because, exegetical citations notwithstanding, Marxism and all its later varieties and schools prior to World War I accepted a paralyzing and debilitating optimism which was inherited from the intellectual tradition of the idea of Progress. Defeat as a possibility of long-term, even permanent duration was never entertained, and a social theory that cannot consider this option is not merely intellectually unsatisfactory but misleading as a basis of political analysis and action. Ignoring the intellectual issue of possessing an accurate account of past events, mechanistic optimism led socialists to slight the negative consequences of action or inaction in relation to desired goals, and to try to fit every major event of political and economic development into a pattern of inevitable progression that justified optimism. Such determinism led to quietism, even celebration and opportunism, as socialists everywhere welcomed the events that led to their undoing. Never was it considered that societies have options to succeed and to fail in the attainment of desired goals, and that the precarious relationship of means to ends warranted continuous concern. Social democracy and bolshevism alike, sharing the premises of historical liberalism, avoided considering the possibility of tragic history, a viewpoint that might be based on secular premises but which placed, as the price of success, a greater burden on superior thought and appropriate social action at critical junctures in history. The need for decisive action in unpredictable situations had no meaningful place in either socialist or, after 1918, bolshevik political strategy, since the normal evolution of things did not warrant it, and for this reason the paralysis of the left in the face of reaction before World War I or between the two World Wars is quite explicable.

The relevance of Marxism to the 20th century depends less on its function as an inspiration of radical faith and commitment than its value as an intellectual system capable of being applied

in an elucidating manner to social reality. After the demise of Austrian socialism and Rosa Luxemburg it may be argued that, on the level of social and economic analysis, Marxists produced remarkably little of value, and hence Marxism's function as an ideology and exaltation of social change was hopelessly limited for the tasks at hand. And since the Western left in general was theoretically impoverished, it should come as no surprise that the American left was not much below the intellectual par of the international movement. There is nothing "exceptionalist" about the fact that not one important or original socialist theoretician emerged in the entire history of American socialism—at best it produced charismatic figures or men of rare degrees of integrity admired for their constancy and dedication. Although American socialism on an organizational level was infinitely weaker than European socialism, what is important is that Western European social democracy and bolshevism could never translate mass political movements into political success—in the form of a substantially new social order—and for many of the same reasons that prevented the emergence of a serious American left.

What were the intellectual causes of the impotence of socialism and its failure to develop a dynamic social theory appropriate to the complicated economic and political realities of this century?

Marx undoubtedly wished his intellectual system to serve as the beginning of a theoretical reservoir that his successors were to continuously apply and amplify, but the fact is that it was not. What may have been a stimulus for social change eventually constricted it as the left failed to keep abreast of the evolution of modern capitalism and society. This widening gap between theory and reality often led to the application of 19th century premises to 20th century conditions, and Marxism became the deadening burden on the left—the opium of optimism and certitude Marx assimilated in the prior century disarmed the revolutionists of the 20th century save, as in the case of Lenin, where the will to power led to the abandonment of ideology. The socialists certainly did not fail because of Marxism, but because their reliance on a stultified view of it was used to justify action for which no better rationale was found. Marxism was primarily effect rather than cause, but it failed to correct opportunism and optimism.

Marx and Engels early took their stand against the assumption of the utopian socialists that industrial technology was malleable and capable of decentralized controls and direction by men for their own social purposes. To Marx and the Marxists the in-

evitable centralization and monopolization of industry under capitalism was not only a prerequisite to a new social order but its best guarantee. Marxists, from the American Socialist Party to the Mensheviks, dismissed tampering with this inexorable trend as a hopeless undertaking. After the economic imperatives of the system had spun itself into a giant tangled superstructure, capitalism would presumably choke under its own weight and contradictions.

Such an interpretation of the evolution of capitalism logically led to a consideration of the fragility of the economy in the larger social context rather than an inquiry into the extent to which big business might have weaknesses not necessarily involving constant and variable capital, surplus value, or rates of profitability, but rather weaknesses reflecting innovation, decentralization of the market, or the international economy. American socialists, with the possible exception of William E. Walling, hardly discussed the prospects for the economy in a way that hinted that the character and function of the political order might be deeply influenced by the needs of the economy, changing the features of both politics and economics in some decisive fashion requiring a political theory of change superior to Engels' last expression of Marxism. This shortcoming was just as true in Europe among the dominant schools of socialism as it was in America.

It is not unfair to suggest that the parliamentarian and legalist theory of social change which the American and European socialists accepted in theory and practice before the First World War, and that the bolsheviks of Western Europe accepted in practice from the mid-1920's onward, was also a logical outcome of Marxist theory. It would be very easy indeed to catalog Marx and Engels' comments concerning the need for revolutionary action, but both in their response to anarchism and the spectacular electoral triumph of German Social Democracy Marx and Engels eventually opted for left *politics* as the crucial means of social change in the West, and hence implicitly for a liberal political theory that assumed that the political structure, in the last analysis and despite corruption, was a classless tool available to the workers.

The belief in the efficacy of the ballot box and the ultimate neutrality of the state laid the basis for the subsequent parliamentary mechanism, naiveté and failure of Western European socialism. A logical conclusion of this premise was a serious misconception of the functions of the state in the economy and society. American socialists could therefore see state intervention in the economy as a kind of surrogate socialism, perhaps reflecting the interests of small business against big industry, as Walling

interpreted it, but an important step toward true socialism. And with their faith in parliamentarianism European socialism was led down the less uncomfortable path of the "politics of responsibility," and an accommodation to a fragile and reluctantly liberal order that failed after 1914 to stem the demise of that system before the challenges of war and reaction. Responsibility to an irresponsible society did in fact lead to the attainment of certain minimal goals in Western Europe—to a kind of welfare state—but the socialist movement failed to reverse the deeply regressive aspects of Western capitalism that periodically expressed itself in crises that threatened to wipe out, and frequently did so, welfarism and much else besides, including the socialists. The view of socialists in America and Europe alike by 1914 was that for all their limitations the existing political forms could be utilized for a clean fight for a clean victory, a victory that would not be borne in terror, struggle and counter-terror. For the new world the socialists wished to create before 1914, the outlines of which Marx, Engels and their successors only vaguely specified, the inherited structural forms were still viable. Both the American and European socialists accepted this assumption.

The vehicle for exploiting this structure was the working class, which in its dynamism, strikes and organizations created in the face of repression and conflict, seemed to be engaged in a continuous process which was, certainly in its American context, best characterized by the term "struggle." The socialists interpreted this struggle as having a revolutionary meaning involving decisive social change rather than limited ends, a confusion that historical experience has yet to prove justified. It seemed inconceivable that this epic of heroism and sacrifice might be directed toward something less than heroic and ennobling goals. The American socialist movement, and certain revisionist schools in Europe as well, also saw the need for winning over men of good will from the middle-classes, classes that had economic problems also driving them to socialism, but in the last analysis the concept of the working class was the core of the theory of change.

Looking at the emergence of new efforts to regulate the economy prior to the First World War, socialists everywhere failed to understand the political-economic process they were living through, a process that was pragmatic, haphazard and hardly comprehended by even its most sophisticated advocates. Nothing in socialist theory, much less *laissez faire* and marginal economic theory, prepared socialists for the possibility that a class-oriented integration of the state and the economy in many key areas would rationalize and

strengthen capitalism. This process could only reinforce modern capitalism in a way that not only made Marxian economics obsolescent, but which made democratic social change, and the political instrumentalities supposedly available for that purpose, more remote. In this process of development, socialists, almost without exception in the United States and generally in Europe, misinterpreted capitalism's desire to strengthen itself with seemingly neutral techniques of sophisticated economic planning, techniques which nothing in the socialist intellectual heritage helped them to understand and which by their endorsing helped lead to the almost willing demise of the left. Like orthodox advocates of *laissez faire,* many socialists believed that state intervention in the economy was a step toward socialism.

In all this the response of American socialism was not exceptional. The question is not merely why socialists failed to build a party in the United States, as important and as uniquely American as these causes may be, but why socialists also failed on the decisive intellectual issues where they were well organized. To the extent that the complexities of 20th century capitalism and politics outstripped American socialism, it may be suggested that it failed for the same reasons that the European socialists failed.

II

Yet the distinctive American causes for the failure of socialism and radicalism in the 20th century also deserve reconsideration. These causes were both external to the organized socialist groups, rooted in the unique character of the larger social order, and internal, reflecting the special qualities of parties and their followers.

The political and intellectual history of the Socialist Party, much less the Communist Party, is far better described and understood by historians than that of perhaps either major party over a similar period, and this fascination with causes that have failed rather than those that have succeeded affords me the luxury of generalizing on the thorough research of others. The genesis of American socialism until 1900 was colorful, like an intellectual hothouse, but not more so than that of the British Labor Party, which was at least as exotic. Socialism as a cause touched every interesting intellectual current—Christians who saw in polite socialism a way to bring a piece of heaven to earth, funny-money advocates seeking deeper solutions than free silver, cooperative colonization groups, led by Eugene Victor Debs, that could appeal to

John D. Rockefeller as a "Christian gentleman" to bring the frontier opportunities back to America, discontented intellectuals seeking to end the alienation of industrial society, followers of Edward Bellamy's Nationalist movement, and, of course, the Marxist-oriented elements that were to effectively dominate the party after 1901 when the Socialist Party was formed out of an amalgam of various groups.

The internal world of the Socialist Party until 1912 was not unlike that of German Social Democracy, from which it absorbed many of the doctrinal positions of both Eduard Bernstein's revisionist school and his seemingly left critics. The Party was not merely partially German on ideological issues—borrowing from the Bernstein-Kautsky debate was a convenience, not a cause—but also in the classic bureaucratic sense described by Robert Michels in *Political Parties*. From this viewpoint the Socialist Party was a party of functionaries, officials and an elite quite impatient with rank-and-file democracy and dissent. The Party, like most pre-World War I European Social Democratic parties, was bolshevik in structure though fairly democratic in organizational theory. Later in 1919 the men who controlled the Party before the war were to expel the vast bulk of the members for their support of bolshevik theory as well, just as they had expelled the embarrassingly non-parliamentarian Industrial Workers of the World faction at the 1912 convention. The Party had never actively sought to enlist the vast slum and industrial working class, and in purging the I. W. W., it broke with its already minimal pre-war mass working class contacts. It was, to cite Trotsky's unkind but apt remark, a party of dentists, and always remained so at the leadership levels.

The middle-class character of the majority of Socialist leaders reflected their belief that the middle-class and skilled workers were the most promising for membership, and this unconsciously required a crucial conformity to dominant prejudices, assumptions that guaranteed that the political strength of the Socialists could never exceed the 900,000 votes of the 1912 election unless the Party radically altered its tactics—which it never did. In the area of trade unionism the Party always maintained its primary contacts with the A. F. of L., which at this time was the most conservative major union in the world.

The position of the Socialist Party on civil rights and racism was hardly designed to win support from the Negro community either. Before the war the Socialist Party tolerated within its ranks social segregation, the exclusion of Negroes from Southern

white locals and theories of racial superiority. The Party passed only one resolution on Negro rights—a weak one—between 1901-12. Anti-Oriental prejudice was common as well, and on this question, as well as the larger issue of immigration restriction, the Party followed the conservative, even reactionary leadership of the A. F. of L. It made little effort before the war to enroll immigrants or to publish sufficient non-English materials, and what little was produced in this field was generally from local and individual initiative.

The expulsion of the I. W. W. in 1912 soon cost the Party an important minority of its 125,000 members, but new circumstances were nevertheless to result in a victory for its left wing. The Party lost most of its intellectuals to the pro-war cause, but its intransigent position against the war—until 1917 there was nothing unique about its neutralism—attracted vast electoral support. In the 1917 municipal elections it increased its percentage of total votes received from three to eight times by campaigning on an anti-war platform, its vote being considerably greater in areas with large Yankee populations. Indeed, by 1919 the Party's membership was almost restored to its 1912 peak, but the complexion of that membership had radically altered. Thirteen percent of the Party belonged to foreign language sections in 1912, 53 percent in 1919. The Socialist Party had moved to the left for the first time, had become a party of immigrants, and was making significant electoral gains.

Although internecine disputes have wracked the Socialist Party since 1919 and would have destroyed it in any case, it is worth noting that at the very moment American Socialism appeared on the verge of significant organizational and political success, it was attacked by the combined resources of the Federal and various state governments. Elected candidates were denied their seats in Congress and various state assemblies, immigrant leaders were deported under the Espionage and Sedition Acts, numerous leaders of the Party were jailed, newspapers were denied mailing privileges and otherwise harassed, and in many localities the club, lock and prison ended Party activity. If the Government used war and patriotism as justification, it should be recalled that leading progressives, with rare exceptions, also supported the Red Scare and repressive laws for reasons always implicit in pre-war progressive ideologies. Progressives wished to integrate the labor and immigrant community into an ordered, homogeneous society, and they feared socialism might be the consequence of their failure to

do so. Roosevelt had never equivocated on the use of force against dissident labor, and consistently endorsed major infractions of the civil liberties of unions and their leaders. Progressivism to men such as Roosevelt was designed, among other things, to head off the threat of socialism by reforming capitalism. The United States Steel Corporation, accepted by Roosevelt as a model of enlightened business, could introduce both welfare measures and Pinkertons when needed. In brief, if labor could not be voluntarily integrated into the social order by good works, it was to be tailored to size by chopping off its unmanageable left by any means appropriate to the task, including suppression. Only when one takes this equation into account can we comprehend the near unanimity of prewar reformers in favor of Wilson's Red Scare and the Espionage and Sedition Acts.

In a sense the failure of American radicalism was due, at least between 1917 and 1920, to the failure of American politics to operate according to the conventionally accepted but rarely practiced ideal theories of democratic political processes. American Socialism was unable to appreciate the limitations this breakdown might have for their own concept of change, a view that remained static until it was too late. To the extent the true character and the efficacy of a political structure is revealed only under the test of pressure and crisis, it can be suggested that Socialists shared a generally-held sublime innocence concerning the resilience of American democracy during crises. For Socialists this naiveté was decisive, since their stake in the validity of existing mechanisms of change was vital—for others, the fixity of the political machine merely reinforced their interests in the status quo.

Looking at American society and politics before the First World War the Socialists could see a class structure as an objective fact, and sufficient tumult and noise within it to impute to it a seemingly dynamic aspect. Such dynamics could be measured, and if amplified held out hope of vindicating the socialist theory of change. Classes, strata and competing interests were recognized by Marx, though he neither created them nor was he the first to discover their existence. Since politics was based ultimately on conflict, the class context of such conflict might lead to decisive social change. Yet one other possibility existed which socialists refused to consider, but which Thorstein Veblen had proposed before the war. American society could also be understood as a class structure without *decisive* class conflict, a society that had conflict limited to smaller issues that were not crucial to the exist-

ing order, and on which the price of satisfying opposition was relatively modest from the viewpoint of the continuation of the social system. In brief, a static class structure serving class ends might be frozen into American society even if the interests and values served were those of a ruling class. A sufficiently monolithic consensus might voluntarily exist on the fundamental questions indispensable to the continuation of the existing political and economic elites, and their primary interest would be respected in the last analysis. The functionally dominant conception of interests, the prime values of the society, did not have to be essentially classless, as Louis Hartz and recent theorists of consensus have argued, but merely accepted by those segments of society without an objective stake in the constituted order. This, I believe, was the point that Veblen was making, not in order to rationalize the dominance of business in American life but to explain the extent of its obvious spiritual and material pervasiveness.

The best argument for such an interpretation is the fact that at no time in American history in this century has the labor movement or the dispossessed translated their struggles for specific demands into a larger demand for fundamental change. The mythology of American society as one that welcomes opportunity and equality for all—as if a vaguely defined rhetoric is more realistic than a frank appreciation of the functionally inegalitarian and class nature of America—extends not only to labor, but even to civil rights activists who seek entry of the Negro into a society that is inherently stratified and class-oriented in decisive ways having nothing to do with race. And if everyone does not share this consensus consciously, and indeed even if the majority neither agrees nor disagrees but is apathetic on such matters, the least that can be said is that no one has been able to redirect such apathy toward a meaningful alternative. Indeed, even the apathetic usually permit the consensual ideology of American life to be defined for them during times of crisis and pressure, and they accept erstwhile national goals which are in fact class goals and interests. The apathy itself proves less than the fact that conscious deviations from manipulated consensual values have been roughly disparaged in this century as "Hunism," "pacifism," "bolshevism," or what have you, suggesting that although voluntary most of the time, the power of legal authority has also reinforced and defined consensus to save society from dangers the possibility of functional democracy posed to the existing order.

The failure of the Socialist Party, therefore, also reflected the consensual and voluntarily accepted total domination of American

political ideology, an ideology that was conveniently described as classless, and in recent years as the end rather than the total triumph of ideology, in order to reaffirm the ideal view of the neutral, free and untrammelled nature of the political mechanism. American radicals accepted this mythology and tried to play the game according to rules that were quite irrelevant to social and political reality, a reality that was obscured until the exercise of nominal political rights threatened to become unmanageable and Red Scares, the manipulation of electoral laws and the like were required to reinforce a consensus that was equivalent to class domination. And since the force of challenges to this control was rarely very great, and the American left was usually incapacitated by its own internal weaknesses, the true character of politics as a means for confirming and legitimizing the existing order was rarely revealed. For the American left to regard this historical experience frankly would also have required a willingness to reorient their descriptive social theory and their concept of change. To consider the union movement as wedded to reform capitalism would have called for a less reverent, flexible view of labor. To regard the electoral structure as free only when it was not exercised would have demanded new tactics, tactics which also might have been inappropriate in light of the seemingly pervasive support for the social order by those with the smallest stake in it. That the society might have been, quite voluntarily and even happily, functionally totalitarian in its monolithic character would have required the rejection of the political optimism of the 19th century, an optimism that not merely rationalized unimportant gestures that constituted a make-believe world of democratic rhetoric concealing controlled politics, but also offered the left some hope of eventual success. That success was perhaps unobtainable in a game so completely loaded required a realism that bordered on a willingness to accept a tragic view that possibly involved writing off America as an arena for social progress in the 20th century.

And rather than consider these unpleasant alternatives the American left after 1919 continued in its ritual acts of self-destruction.

One of the more common interpretations of the failure of the American left—defined to include both the Socialist and Communist Parties after 1919—ascribes its demise to the success of American capitalism. This view might make sense applied to a period of full employment, but for a decade after 1929 both the left and the larger social structure in which it operated had failed,

and well before the New Deal reforms allegedly stole its thunder and presumably impinged on its basic demands, the Socialist Party was quite dead. It existed, of course, but never as a serious factor in shaping American politics or labor unionism toward some socially meaningful new departure .What it called "life" was a factional precociousness that sharpened the polemical talents of its brighter young followers, talents many were later to employ to their own advantage as key spokesmen for anti-communism after the Second World War.

The leaders of the Socialist Party during the 1920's fell into quieter, bureaucratic ways, managing their existing institutions, building their private careers and maintaining a doctrinal purity which was by this time well to the left of that prevalent in the pre-war party. The Communists, despite their anti-parliamentarian rhetoric, ran their first Presidential candidate in 1924, and differed only slightly from the Socialist Party in their functional political premises. The Communist Party too was primarily a party of recent immigrants, and during the 1920's its amoebic internal life kept it preoccupied with Trotskyists and Lovestonites. Though it created its own organizational forms for the purpose, it duplicated the union and other activities of the Socialists. In brief, just as Social Democracy was bolshevized into bureaucratic channels before the war, Bolshevism was being social democratized toward parliamentarian and unionist directions after 1924 in a way hardly designed to create a new order where others had failed.

The divisions in the Socialist Party after 1933 do not warrant much consideration. Factors having to do with age, politics or psychology kept the Party in factional turbulance to the extent that from 22,000 members in 1934 it dropped to 7,000 in 1938 and 2,000 in 1941, and has not exceeded the last figure since that time. During the 1930's the majority of the Socialist Party's members were foreign-born or first generation, and this pattern of immigrant domination was even more widespread in the Communist Party. In this context both parties became a kind of fraternal center—the majority of the literature of the Socialist Party was not in English—for lonely migrants who might raise funds at banquets for the Scottsboro boys but were essentially adjusting as best they could to a strange, new life. What was ultimately more important to such leftists was the conviviality of the banquet hall and comrades who spoke the mother tongue. These activities might also finance the work of the more earnest younger men who were wholly committed to politics as they defined it and, especially in the case of the Communists after

1935, might be caught in the euphoria and passion of organizing the C.I.O., going to Spain or participating in student movements. Even when the Communists lost their capacity to attract the young and the earnest they could still, even in the worst days of McCarthyism, retain their banquet hall followers whose social roots were grounded in the activities of the I.W.O. or other organizations—aging and bewildered people who were transformed in the social imagery into conspirators posing a serious danger to society.

The intellectual problems of the Socialists and Communists in America were very much like those of their associates in Europe. Throughout the 1930's the European left was fighting a losing, rear-guard battle and drifting along with the capitalists toward a world conflagration. The left was characterized by futile efforts to respond to the initiatives of reaction. The Western European left, the Communist Parties included, was incapable of breaking out of the mold of a parliamentarianism no longer resilient enough to provide the decisive leadership necessary for social change capable of stopping the tide of the Right. "Socialism" from this time onward became merely another, more technically sophisticated way of managing an effete European capitalism, and after the Popular Front period, and especially during 1944-47, the Communists frequently shared in this game by courting respectability via cabinet posts in France, Belgium and Italy, an effort that frequently made the practical domestic function of the Communist Party in Western Europe indistinguishable from that of the Social Democrats and liberal centrist parties.

It may perhaps be suggested that in fact the institutional and economic heritage of Western capitalism limited the European left, and hence doomed it to failure. If so, the left in both Europe and America never seriously acknowledged the dilemma, but persisted in giving obeisance to socialist doctrines that molded their political action to a concept of change. The dominant political leaders of these movements rarely contemplated that the left was participating in the strengthening of capitalism. This lack of reflection characterized the American left even more than the European, for here there was no intellectual core capable of grasping these dilemmas.

III

The sins of the Bolshevik left after the Second World War are well documented, so much so that the history of the American Communist Party in all its dimensions has become a major,

well financed and thoroughly debilitating concern which has been both a cause and reflection of the demise of the American left. In its worst aspect it suggested that the Communist Party was an important experience in post-World War I American history, just as paranoid McCarthyites had suggested. At best it was a dialogue with McCarthyism on terms and issues defined by that movement, critical only insofar as it applied higher canons of evidence. This concern engaged an articulate sector of the non-Communist Party left that implicitly regarded a discourse on an unimportant and impotent party as a more serious undertaking than a confrontation of basic social and political questions. Indeed, the issue of the Communist Party gave the left an excuse to postpone and ultimately avoid dealing with the much more significant and difficult issues facing it in an age of nuclear terror.

It was not unexpected that the non-communist left might focus so closely on the Communist Party, since anti-communism had become a categorical imperative of American life, and a way for the left to integrate itself with the larger assumptions of their society and perhaps make itself more plausible. Succumbing to the mood of the times, even while proclaiming a higher if not clearly defined morality, the American left gradually took over even more of the crucial assumptions of conventional politics, aligning itself with the more liberal wings of the Cold War in the hope, quite as chimerical, that it would succeed with the liberals in a way it had not been able to do with the workers. Turning an astringent eye on the faults of the bolsheviks, the post-war left could not recognize its own, much less see that their moral defects were very much in the same category as those it attributed to the bolsheviks. Both had lost critical perspective toward their favorite side, neither had anything new to say in regard to the American scene and its mechanics of change. The Eastern European situation was described by the socialists in the blackest detail, but little was said, for example, about the actions of French socialist ministers who in Indo-China, Madagascar and Algeria committed horrors on behalf of an old order that paled those of bolsheviks groping their way against resistance toward new societies. The moral distinctions that were evoked on behalf of anti-communism were obscured when it was necessary to give critical support to the West.

Such policies were a logical concomitant of social democratic biases, but not entirely conscious. With the exception of those who gave up socialism for sociology and a technical precociousness which produced formal structural theories with less historical relev-

ance than even hobbled socialist theses, American socialism of the non-Communist variety was characterized by a pervasive dilettantism. Crucial political judgments were made on the basis of the most casual information, and a precise focus on the institutional operation of society, politics and foreign relations was just as lacking as before the war. Socialism as an intellectual system became, for the most part, impressionist and literary, which added a sensitivity to subtle problems in only a few areas. Alienation and mass culture—the former had been a familiar complaint of radicals for decades—were deemed worthy of closer inquiry than economics or diplomacy. The post-war left preferred taking its insights from political novelists who, for all their perception, saw the world through a looking glass that obscured important distinctions that could be defined only by viewing society directly. A mediocre novelist such a George Orwell was far more influential than considerably more intelligent social scientists, and his success was based on the political favor with which his views were held.

Once socialists regarded totalitarianism, much less bolshevism, as a cause of the world crisis, rather than as the effect of the collapse of liberalism and Western politics, it was possible for socialists to enlist, with reservations that did not change their basic commitment, in the cause of the "Free World." The results were catastrophic. American radicals soon found themselves cutting the edge of their criticism and explicitly acknowledging the community of interests and assumptions with American politics and society that had always been implicit. In this position they were at a premium, their talents and books overpraised as they titillated a jaded and casual upper middle-class, professional audience. A few might sincerely maintain a semblance of critical integrity by dissecting marginal aspects of American life and politics, aspects that if altered would leave the larger society intact, but by 1952 no important neutralist or third-camp foreign policy position could be found among articulate radicals. And what was never willingly tolerated, above all, was a hard, dispassionate, uncommitted look at the competing worlds, their attainments as well as their shortcomings, much less a searching view of the foundations of American society and its purposes and historic role in the post-1945 crisis. Stronger claimants to intellectual and literary importance who failed to accept these premises were isolated or ignored by upper bohemia and the intellectual set connected with universities and the "cultural media." Only the subterranean world of the beats and isolated renegades claimed Kenneth Patchen; Europeans published Karl Korsch, who built a major reputation in France

without ever being acknowledged in the country he resided in the last 25 years of his life; the anti-communist left read but also reviled C. Wright Mills. The post-war generation recognized the need for new ideas, and the call for the application of intelligence became a static posture, but little more. Intelligence was rarely applied to specific American issues in a way that increased knowledge, and studies of communism failed to alter this deficiency.

In the name of humanism, socialists in the United States gradually but firmly aligned themselves with the American cause in the deepest political and cultural sense—Castro, the Vietminh and the victims of the post-war world crisis became first as guilty as their potential executioners, as culpable morally, and then deserted in a manner that increasingly absolved the executioners. The impact of the Western resistance against revolutionary movements, especially in Eastern Europe and China, was rarely considered in evaluating the social systems that emerged. Again victims were condemned for their responses to the crimes of their executioners, as if the Cubans, Vietnamese and Chinese had chosen with deliberate malice to violate a humanist tradition they too evoked and claimed to act upon. The power of the old orders to shape the form of the new systems, and what was transitional or permanent, defensive or deliberate in the synthesis was never considered. Economic development as a justification of their action was dismissed as narrow economism, as if economic development were worth nothing. The losses involved in such a process were carefully examined, but never weighed and balanced against the gains, particularly in those areas that had precious little intellectual freedom or political democracy to lose. Growth rates and their distribution struck many as meaningless, and for *litterateurs* as uninteresting. That the difference between bolshevik totalitarianism with bread, and capitalist totalitarianism without bread, is the elimination of hunger, filth and death was gainsaid. That a dynamic society that ends starvation is freer in a crucial sense, and saves far more life than it may willingly or unwillingly destroy, is a point that was never confronted, even when politically meaningful options to the status quo or controlled planned economies did not exist.

To have considered these questions would have meant a rupture between the non-communist American left and the social order to which it had accomodated itself. To re-examine the political context of socialism closely might have meant a new and sympathetic alignment with forces throughout the world that have rejected the hegemony of American leadership, and it would have

meant a return to isolation and discomfort. By the end of the 1950's the left which emerged from the Socialist Party tradition of the 1930's was incapable of making this adjustment. For 50 years the American left, because of ideological roots and optimistic belief in the efficacy of transforming the existing order, had been grounded in the acceptable myths and premises of the existing order. In the context of the world conflict, to refuse to align itself with the United States would have been equivalent to breaking the illusion of being political men with a political future. To assume otherwise would have been to take the unenviable and pessimistic position that radicalism, given the social and political realities of America, had moved beyond politics not because it had no political ideas but because it finally acknowledged it had no political means. The left would have been beyond politics not because politics is unimportant, but because the control and exercise of power is nominally democratic but in reality voluntarily totalitarian. To refuse to support the American cause would have shattered the last illusions concerning the nation's ability to tolerate dissent which does not choose to mark out areas of agreement on fundamental assumptions.

Instead radicals sought to remain politically "relevant" at the expense of their ability to protest against injustice emphatically and negatively. They found it necessary to argue for the existence of a viable political structure in the hope description would eventually assume the nature of self-fulfilling prophecy, even if their description of the political process sounded strangely similar to those of the academic schoolmen who confused liberal rhetoric with reality. At no time did they attempt to articulate a sense of history which generalized on the consistency in United States' policies at home and abroad, for this could only lead to seeing the politics of liberal rhetoric as a trap, and the pessimistic consequences of such a realization were not considered to be worth the loss of the assumption, if not illusion, that radicals were still free agents of potential power in a situation that was plastic and retained cause for hope.

The failure of the left by the end of the 1950's did not eliminate the need for a left, nor did their forced optimism alter the graver realities which underlay American domestic affairs and foreign policy. That a "new left" should have emerged was both predictable and logical, and that it should have all-too-many of the characteristics of the older left should not be surprising. Its factionalism is debilitating, and its view of the Negro and poor is

not unlike that of the old leftists or Wobblies who cultivated illusions concerning mass industry or migrant workers. There is no serious awareness that modest gains for the Negro and poor may make far-reaching successes, the prerequisite of permanent social change, impossible. A society that is poisoned produces poisoned responses and men, and those who do not succumb to these pressures may find themselves a very small minority of the white and black community—a rare minority of principled radicals with a commitment that is not likely to gain followers in the milieu of aborted movements of progress.

The new left has had the political courage to challenge the politics of the status quo, though it too frequently hopes that the existing political mechanism may somehow be applied to serve its own radical ends. But it has not asked sharp or relevant questions concerning the intellectual premises of the old left, and has merely rejected its chronic anti-communism and myopia concerning the liberals in the Democratic Party. To succeed intellectually where the old left failed, the new left will have to find fundamentally new and far-reaching premises, premises that are not obsequious in the presence of the ghosts of the 18th and 19th centuries. And to succeed politically it must find dynamic possibilities and forces of movement in a social order in crisis, forces it must frankly acknowledge may not exist as permanent or decisive factors for social change. Having rejected the conservative, futile politics of the old left, the new left has yet to define a solid alternative, much less begin to create it.

Given the consensual basis of American politics and society in the 20th century, and the will of the beneficiaries of consensus to apply sufficient force and power at home and abroad when resistance to consensus and its hegemony arises, the new left must confront the prospect of failure as an option for radical, democratic politics in America. Rational hopes for the 20th century now rest outside America and in spite of it, and the least the American political and intellectual resistance may do is to encourage the efforts of those elsewhere who have more options than we to build a new democracy and society. At best a new left may only be able to define a new intellectual creed at home which permits honest men to save their consciences and integrity even when they cannot save or transform politics. This little cannot be gainsaid, for we have yet to win even this, and once this much is obtained perhaps there will be a realistic basis for a new politics that may yet eventually emerge.