

CRISIS OF THE LEFT?

by Russell Jacoby

"Today in the United States there is no Left; practical political activities are monopolized by an irresponsible two-party system; cultural activities — although formally quite free — tend to become nationalist or commercial or merely private." This statement could have been made today or yesterday. In fact it was made in 1959 by C. Wright Mills in an essay titled "The Decline of the Left." Historical parallels are tempting. Mills' essay was posed before a renaissance of political activity that stretched out from the Cuban Revolution. The urge is great to view the future in the same terms; the 80s will witness a renewal of political activity.

Yet the Left has always drugged itself with the medicine of an imminent turn; the crisis of capitalism is always in the offing. After every setback the Comintern dusted-off the metaphor of the revolutionary wave; the revolution was always in the trough between upsurges. Today you do not need a weatherman to know the revolutionary storm is over. The 80s will be as close to the 60s as the Black Hundreds are to the Red Guards.

Violence not of liberation, but of destruction and self-destruction is in the air. The murder of John Lennon is a sign of the times; nor should we forget Allard Lowenstein, and the others. The lesson is clear: the 60s will not be ignored but annihilated. There were not two Oswalds but a million. Marcuse quoted Beckett: "Don't wait to be hunted to hide." Today we need an E.J. Gumbel. Long before Nazi violence triumphed, Gumbel, a left-wing statistician, documented its institutionalization. In the early years of the Weimar Republic he published a series of pamphlets, including *Two Years of Murder*, and *Four Years of Political Murder*.

If the absence of a Left in the near future is probable, it is also rationalization; it justifies the hysteria of everyday life and work as the only recourse for glum revolutionaries. Down-in-the-mouth Leftists could not be happier; they can manage their careers as if directed by the Central Committee. They pine for the heat of revolutionary fervor while dousing the flames. This seems certain: to affirm that nothing will change will guarantee it; and to simply repeat past practices and theories will repeat past setbacks.

To analyze future prospects requires sorting out the subjective and objective dimensions of the current impasse. Defeats of the Left may be due to faulty theories and practices; they may also be due to the overwhelming power of the establishment. Recent symposiums on the Left have tended to wring hands — "we have failed to overcome racism, sexism in our midst, etc. etc." — instead of pointing fingers to forces outside the Left. To lose does not necessarily signify flabbiness of theory or will, but absence of power.

Objective reasons for the weakness of the Left are familiar; the "classic" weakness of the U.S. Left was compounded by McCarthyism which severed its living history. For some of these reasons that emerged in the 1960s was strikingly novel; there were few guides, good or bad. For these same reasons the New Left lacked roots, history and consistency. When it ran into obstacles it embraced the past as if it were the future. The enthusiasm for Stalinism and orthodox Marxism was possible only because of the social amnesia. Comintern resolutions on the Black Nation, bankrupt already in the 1930s, were pondered as the latest word. The Left ate its way through the past as if it were a plate of fortune cookies.

The impact of the state did not end with McCarthyism; it is easy to gloss over the consequences of more recent state repression and persecution. It is not simply rhetorical to argue that especially the black movement suffered profound damage. The stock of leadership is never large. Martin Luther King, Malcom X and George Jackson were irreplaceable. That each was shot down exactly at that point in their lives when they were embracing a wider and more radical politics does not seem accidental. On the American Left the only consistency has been the blood-bath.

To be sure, the role — real and potential — of leadership in the Left is difficult to appraise. Yet the significance of a leadership with talent, integrity and vision is often understated. Here theory ratifies reality, for the U.S. left has never been blessed by capable leadership. Perhaps the most damning comment on the New Left is its failure to produce a stable leadership. Moreover, its theoretical vision came from aging Europeans such as Isaac Deutscher and Herbert Marcuse. No one has replaced them. Of course the vagaries of the movement itself exacted a toll. As the focus changed from students to revolutionary youth to lumpen youth to China to Third World to the prison movement to the working class a stable leadership proved impossible.

The fitfulness and flightiness of the Left responded to a real absence: the absence of a revolutionary subject. Marxists hunted for a revolutionary subject. Every strike presaged new developments, and confirmed old ones. The Left generally canvassed the socio-economic structure for revolutionary groups as if leafing through the Sears catalog of power tools. Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, now over 15 years old, is hardly obsolete; it indicated the dilemma. The central contradictions of capitalism have been "suspended," and only surface on the margins.

The conventional responses are not satisfactory. One magically substitutes the universe of the self for the revolution. Whatever I am doing, thinking or feeling is identified as revolutionary. The other is no better, and perhaps worse; it requires total self-abnegation. The revolutionary movements are always somewhere else — in Latin America (for whites) in the black community, and so on.

Narcissism and self-sacrifice are the approved flights from an intractable society. To be sure, today sacrifice has fallen on dog days, the province of new immigrants. Everywhere self-absorption absorbs the self. To note that the full time cultivation of the self has little to do with revolution is not to advertise revolutionary asceticism. The politics of guilt has sullied the Left for decades. Today, however, the imperatives of self-advancement and pre-occupation seem only to advance. A recent survey of incoming college freshman found that not only were their parents more affluent than previous students'; but there was a decided jump in the desire for money and power, and fall of interest in public affairs. The Left is not composed of incoming freshman, but the same forces are at work.

Within a dim scene, Marxism flourishes in universities and colleges. Nor does it suffer from the ills of born again Stalinism; it has its own ills. As Max Horkheimer noted in the 1930s, 'academic Marxism, deprived of the urgency of social change, decays into meaningless symbols. Today it has become a minor industry, a fast food outlet of freeze-dried concepts. That Marxists have been on the forefront of spreading structuralism, semiotics, Lacanism, grammatology, and so on, is worth considering. It is an expression of the crisis of the falling rate of intelligence, which may be the hope. Anything fills the void; and anything does.

Academic Marxism is caught by pincers. A significant student Left belongs to the past; consequently, there is very little pressure on universities to keep or hire Leftists. Those on the margins become academic "guest workers," a migrant labor force with

few rights and little pay. This only increases the insecurity and guilt of those Leftists who have already managed to obtain secure jobs. They avert their eyes and redouble the efforts to achieve respectability. For this price they receive their rewards as reliable servants of the bureaucracy. In a period when jobs are short and the prospects for the Left uncertain, the price is a bargain.

Nevertheless, academic Marxism harbors a specific hope: it will preserve the past for the future. When the conditions change, and the students are once again provoked, the links with past radicalism will not have been severed. For years Paul Baran was perhaps the single self-identified Marxist on a U.S. campus; and through his books he aided the renaissance of Marxism. This could be an inspiration and a model. The situation today is certainly different, and better. Yet it would be idealist to argue that Marxism will be preserved because many individual Marxists have obtained sinecures. Paul Baran was threatened with isolation not semiotics. The danger is a Marxism which has lost its mind and soul.

Academic Marxism is hardly the whole of the political Left. Recent symposiums on the Left have stressed that the goals of the past decades have not been met: racism, poverty, discrimination, remain current realities; the 80s will see groups trying to survive in the teeth of government retrenchment and recession. This is undeniable. The struggle to survive cannot be criticized; yet it has little to do with the fate of a political Left. Nor is this an insult. The Left has often confused oppression with revolution; the most oppressed were the most blessed. Yet it belongs to basic Marxism that there is no automatic link between suffering and revolutionary activity. Marx never argued that the working class suffered more than the peasantry. The specific conditions of the working class prompted the hope of revolution. That various socio-economic groups and minorities are in for a bad deal in the coming years, cannot be doubted. It can be doubted that they will cross the line separating the struggle to eat from the struggle for emancipation. Those who are sound in body and mind will not fight the revolution; those who are mutilated beyond repair cannot: this is the curse which has bewitched the revolutionary project.

The next years will be the era of *partial* struggles. Groups will enter the political arena to do battle for separate rights and interests: rent control, health care, environment, and so on. It would be arrogant to write any of this off. A wildcat strike to preserve a coffee break which is being eroded away is surely justified. Yet the struggles are fragmentary, local and transitory. The whole is elusive. If the strength of contemporary radicalism is its localism, this is also its weakness. As always the danger is in self-righteousness and self-mystification: the confusion of better garbage collection with revolution. Apart from any ends which are achieved, partial struggles keep alive an arena for political activity and commitment; for many individuals this will be critical — and more: a renaissance of political activity is unthinkable without the participation of individuals. When the conditions change, those who have remained in the daily fray may be able to show the way. To be sure, in the rat race of daily politics they may also forget the way.

Any predictions about the Left ring false; the situation is objectively ambiguous. To ransack the political reality searching for motion and radical groups testifies to impotence. Vulgar Marxism has not improved with age. The New Left and Western Marxism are distant memories and the private turf of academics. A crisis of Marxism had already been announced in 1899, when Labriola attacked it. He noted that before Marxism could enter into a crisis, it had to be established.

Yet no matter how bleak the present prospects, neither the U.S. economy nor the

international political order are ordained for eternal existence. Resignation and cynicism must be resisted. It is clear, at least, that whatever the historical weaknesses of the Left, it never suffered from too much intelligence. C. Wright Mills can remain a guide. In the same essay on "The Decline of the Left," he stated, "Opposition to established culture and politics often consists of scattered little groups working in small circulation magazines, dealing in unsold cultural products."

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