

THE QUESTION

The following essay by Eugene Genovese is really an open letter to the left, intended to provoke a discussion, and so we have circulated it to people likely to be provoked. Here are their responses and Genovese's reply. Since "The Question" is important, we will publish a selection of further correspondence in a future issue.—EDs.

As a university professor, I teach, participate in professional associations, lecture on various campuses, give papers at scholarly conferences, and review books for national journals and local newspapers: in short, I get around. For many years I have lived in dread of having to answer The Question. Curiously, no one has asked it.

At first I wondered if I had an ego problem. Did I feel bruised to learn that I was not important enough to be asked? Were not more visible and professionally celebrated chaps with similar backgrounds having to face the music? Apparently not. So far as I know, none of the others, whose number is legion, has been asked either.

The Question: "What did you know, and when did you know it?" For at the age of fifteen I became a Communist, and, although expelled from the party in 1950 at age twenty, I remained a supporter of the international movement and of the Soviet Union until there was nothing left to support. Now, as everyone knows, in a noble effort to liberate the human race from violence and oppression we broke all records for mass slaughter, piling up tens of millions of corpses in less than three-quarters of a century. When the Asian figures are properly calculated, the aggregate to our credit may reach the seemingly incredible numbers widely claimed. Those who are big on multiculturalism might note that the great majority of our victims were nonwhite.

"... a decent respect to the opinions of mankind. . ."

Never having been much good at math, I shy away from quibbles over statistics. Still, all quibbles aside, we have a disquieting number of corpses to account for.

Those of us who have preached the need to break eggs in order to make omelets might note the political complexion of some of the eggs. About twenty years ago, picking up on some passages in Roy Medvedev's *Let History Judge*, I wondered if Comrade Stalin had not killed more communists than were killed by all the bourgeois, imperialist, Fascist, and Nazi regimes put together. "It can't be true," said I. "Has Comrade Medvedev taken up serious drinking?" So I sat down to do some rough arithmetic. (You do not have to be good at math to do that much arithmetic.) Alas, Comrade Medvedev had not taken up serious drinking.

Reflecting here on moral responsibility, I have referred to "we." For it has never occurred to me that the moral responsibility falls much less heavily on those of us on the American left than it fell on Comrade Stalin and those who replicated his feats in one country after another. And I am afraid that some of that moral responsibility falls on the "democratic socialists," "radical democrats," and other leftwingers who endlessly denounced Stalinism but could usually be counted on to support—"critically," of course—the essentials of our political line on world and national affairs.

The Question

Especially amusing has been the spectacle of those who pronounced themselves anti-Stalinists and denounced the socialist countries at every turn and yet even today applaud each new revolution, although any damned fool has to know that most of them will end in the same place. For that matter, how could we have survived politically were it not for the countless liberals who, to one extent or another, supported us, apparently under the comforting delusion that we were social reformers in rather too much of a hurry—a delusion we ourselves never suffered from.

There are liberals and liberals, and a distinction would have to be made in a more leisurely presentation. Even in academia there are indeed those who defend liberal principles tenaciously and honorably. But the countless opportunists and careerists who dominate the historical associations call themselves liberals as a matter of political convenience. They went with the McCarthyite flow in the 1950s and go with its left-wing variant today. In the unlikely prospect of a fascist or communist ascendancy tomorrow, they may be counted on to apply for party cards as soon as it looks like the smart move.

Many of my old comrades and almost all of those ostensibly independent radicals and high-minded liberals remain unruffled. After all, did we not often protest against some outrage or other in the Soviet Union or China, signing an indignant petition or open letter? I know I did. And does not that change everything? I am afraid not, but I have nothing to offer as critique other than that which may be found in Galatians 6:7.

On May 11, 1992, having been invited by the right-wing American Enterprise Institute to reflect on the collapse of the socialist countries, I summoned up whatever capacity I have for dissembling in an effort to deflect the one question I did not want to answer. I did not want to answer it before a right-wing audience because I feared I would unleash my Sicilian temper and counterattack with the litany of the crimes of the imperialists and their insufferable apologists. I began:

It is a great pleasure to be with you today,

although, since I claim expertise only as a historian of the Old South, I speak on current issues with trepidation. I do hope that your invitation carries no sadistic intent—that you do not expect an autobiographical *mea culpa*. For while it is true that I have been a Marxist and a bitter-end supporter of the Soviet Union, I dislike autobiographies and admire the CIA's noble dictum, "Admit nothing, explain nothing, apologize for nothing."

The audience responded with good-natured laughter. Generally speaking, rightwingers are decidedly more courteous than we of the left and would not think of abusing their guests, as I probably would have abused them if challenged. They laid some tough questions on me during the discussion period, but not The Question.

Recently, I remarked upon the corpses to a well-known left-wing journalist with whom my wife and I were having dinner. He looked disgusted: "You? You of all people are getting masochistic?" I reassured him as best I could. For, no, I am not getting masochistic in my old age. No, I am not about to cringe before rightwingers who supported numerous imperialist slaughters or social democrats whose responsible and moderate governments aided and abetted them. Yes, I do remember the glorious record of the bourgeoisie in the slave trade and the plantation colonies and the mass murders in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I do recall that the Holocaust was not our doing. I still burn at the indifference with which virtually the whole American public received the reports of a quarter million Indonesian workers and peasants butchered in the 1960s, not in a civil war but in their beds. And I know the rest. No, I would not stand still for The Question from those people and would probably tell them what I have always told my classes, "Your side has had its mass murderers, and we have had ours."

Perhaps knowledge of the record of imperialist atrocities leads our liberal colleagues to refuse to single us out by asking The Question. But I am afraid not. After all, they never stop asking southern whites about their crimes, real and imagined, against blacks. And let's face it: all the combined crimes of white southerners,

The Question

at least if we restrict ourselves to the period since emancipation, would be worth no more than a footnote in a casebook that starred us.

A few years ago, there was a successful effort to get the Organization of American Historians (OAH) to condemn apartheid in South Africa. In the OAH and other professional associations, Professor Wilborne Washburne resolutely opposed this politicization, and attempted to expose its hypocrisy by offering an amendment to condemn the “necklacing” of black South Africans, including children, by the militants of the African National Congress. (For those who have forgotten, “necklacing” was execution by burning the victims alive.) The ANC subsequently repudiated necklacing as not only wrong but barbarous. The OAH has yet to endorse that repudiation.

I laughed. Those bloody South African whites did kill a lot of blacks and ought to answer for it, but throughout their whole history they probably never equaled the numbers we put up in one of our more spirited month’s work. I laughed even harder when our liberal colleagues poured out their wrath on the ghastly racists in South Africa while they remained silent about the immeasurably greater slaughters occasioned by the periodic ethnic cleansing that was—and is—going on in black Africa and every other part of the globe. The *New York Times* recently announced that the death toll in the latest round of ethnic cleansing in Burundi has reached 150,000, with the fate of a half million or so refugees in doubt. The historical associations have not been heard from. Nor should anyone expect that they will be.

If we are to believe the worthies of the radical left, to pose The Question means to engage in a reactionary ploy to deflect attention from the oppression of women, gays, and other beleaguered minorities. Scholars in our own ranks have shown precious little interest in reflecting seriously on the collapse of the socialist countries we supported to the bitter end or on any personal responsibilities we might have for

the occasional unpleasantness that led to so sad a denouement.

And sad the denouement has been. For one might make a case of sorts to justify mass slaughters as the necessary price to be paid for a grand human liberation. Terrible as the sacrifices may have been, were they not justified by the beautiful world of equality, justice, and universal love we were creating for our children? During the communist revolution of 1919 in Hungary, Sigmund Freud startled his friends by announcing that he had become half a Bolshevik. One of his communist students explained that the revolution would mean oceans of blood out of which would come a just and humane society. Freud became half a Bolshevik: he declared his belief in every word of the first half.

In retrospect Freud looks good and we not so good. Our justification began to look seedy when the grand liberation featured hideous political regimes under which no sane person would want to live. It became preposterous when our project ended in the ignominious collapse of the social system that was supposed to undergird a brave new world and justify the staggering sacrifice of human life.

We easily forget the economic rationale that Marx taught us, namely, that socialism would have to provide unprecedented abundance if it were to sustain social liberation of any kind. With a few notable exceptions, leftists no longer find it fashionable to discuss economics at all beyond the now routine rejection of a “command economy” and some disingenuous mumbling about the necessity for markets. But where is there a serious attempt to determine the extent to which any socialism could function without a command economy or to show how a socialist economy could integrate markets? A few left-wing economists, most notably Louis Ferleger and Jay Mandle, tried to raise these questions long before the collapse of the socialist economies, but they were effectively shut out of the left-wing press and are still ignored. And we may doubt that the wry remark of Nancy Folbre and Samuel Bowles, two other respected left-wing economists, will cause a wrinkle: “Leftwing economists—among whom we count ourselves—have thus

The Question

far failed to come up with a convincing alternative to capitalism.” (Nancy Folbre and Samuel Bowles, letter to the *Nation*, Nov. 29, 1993; and see also, Louis Ferleger and Jay R. Mandle, *A New Mandate: Democratic Choices for a Prosperous Economy*, University of Missouri Press, 1994).

No one should be surprised that none of our leading historical associations have thought it intellectually challenging to devote sessions at their enormous annual meetings to frank discussions of the socialist debacle. We of the left are regularly invited to give papers on just about any subject except this one. We are not asked to assess the achievements as well as the disasters, the heroism as well as the crimes, and the lessons we ourselves have learned from a tragic experience. No one need be surprised that we have never been called upon to explain ourselves. The *pezzonovanti* of our profession have more important things on their minds. When they can take time away from their primary concern (the distribution of jobs, prizes, and other forms of patronage), they are immersed in grave condemnations of the appalling violations of human rights by Christopher Columbus. I know that it is in bad taste to laugh, but I laugh anyway. I would rather be judged boorish than seen throwing up.

We do not need guilt trips and breast-beating. We do need a sober reassessment of the ideological foundations of our political course. I am not sure that I am right to refuse to answer to our long-time political adversaries. But I am sure that we of the left have to answer to ourselves, to each other, to the movement to which we have devoted our lives, and especially to the millions of our comrades who were themselves slaughtered in a heroic effort to make the world a better place. The left sneers at Burke’s great dictum that government—or, better, society—is a compact between the living, the dead, and the as-yet unborn. But the truth of the dictum returns to haunt us again and again. If nothing else, we cannot escape the duty to see that the millions of our comrades who died in revolutionary struggles did not die in vain.

Am I crazy to think that if we do not understand why and how we did what we did,

we shall certainly end by doing it again—and again? Crazy I may be, but I try not to be a fool. And only a fool would trust those who are now playing possum with even a modicum of political power.

What did we know, and when did we know it? We knew everything essential and knew it from the beginning. This short answer will doubtless be hotly contested by the substantial number of leftwingers now ensconced in the academic establishment. I can hear them now: “Where does Genovese get off speaking for us? Yes, he himself always knew. He never even had the decency to pretend not to know. He thereby proved himself the cad we have always known him to be. But we ourselves never even imagined that we were hearing anything more than the usual stories circulated by imperialists and reactionaries. Honest.”

I am prepared to accept those pleas of innocence, and I hope that everyone else exercises Christian charity and accepts them too. But I do worry about where pleas of innocence will land those who offer them. It occurs to me that it would be much safer to admit complicity. For Americans who honor the spirit and content of the Constitution would feel compelled to defend our academic freedom, including our right to have borne with equanimity the blood purges and mass executions. If, however, our innocents insist upon pleading ignorance rather than a complicity permitted by the Constitution, they ruin themselves. Especially the historians among them. For they thereby admit to a willful refusal to examine the evidence that had been piled high from the beginning. Thus they confess to professional incompetence. I counsel against such a plea, for it would constitute grounds for revocation of tenure. Safer to plead *no lo contendere*.

When someone gets around to asking me The Question I shall answer frankly, explaining as best I can my reasons for having gone along. But I shall insist upon doing so in a forum in which “democratic socialists,” “radical democrats,” and liberals are called upon to answer too. For it is our collective dirty linen that has to be washed. And besides, our right-wing adversaries already know the answer, even if

they have no few hard questions to answer themselves.

For the moment I shall settle for a few topic sentences. The horrors did not arise from perversions of radical ideology but from the ideology itself. We were led into complicity with mass murder and the desecration of our professed ideals not by Stalinist or other corruptions of high ideals, much less by unfortunate twists in some presumably objective course of historical development, but by a deep flaw in our very understanding of human nature—its frailty and its possibilities—and by our inability to replace the moral and ethical baseline long provided by the religion we have dismissed with indifference, not to say contempt.

The question of moral responsibility has been raised within the left, if gingerly and indirectly, by a few brave souls like Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Cornel West, who have drawn attention to the price we have paid for scouting Christian ethics while having nothing to substitute and who have, in effect, called for an end to the blind hatreds that confuse the sin with the sinner. Unger and West are justly revered figures on the left and accorded at least formal respect. Yet their efforts toward a reassessment of the religious foundations of political ethics have not sparked the slightest discussion. It is fair to ask: what kind of respect is that? Are we supposed to believe that Unger and West have been kidding?

Our whole project of “human liberation” has rested on a series of gigantic illusions. The catastrophic consequences of our failure during this century—not merely the body count but the monotonous recurrence of despotism and wanton cruelty—cannot be dismissed as aberrations. Slimmed down to a technologically appropriate scale, they have followed in the wake of victories by radical egalitarian movements throughout history. We have yet to answer our right-wing critics’ claims, which are regrettably well documented, that throughout history, from ancient times to the peasant wars of the sixteenth century to the Reign of Terror and beyond, social movements that have

espoused radical egalitarianism and participatory democracy have begun with mass murder and ended in despotism.

Let us grant, *arguendo*, that the ruling classes have done worse. Whatever solace that thought may give us, our own problem remains: what kind of society could we build on a worldview marred by flagrant irrationalities paraded as self-evident truths, even if reinforced by sandbox cries of “You’re another”?

The allegedly high ideals we placed at the center of our ideology and politics are precisely what need to be reexamined, but they can no longer even be made a subject for discussion in the mass media and our universities, to say nothing of the left itself. They are givens: an unattainable equality of condition; a radical democracy that has always ended in the tyranny it is supposed to overcome; a celebration of human goodness or malleability, accompanied by the daily announcement of newly discovered “inalienable rights” to personal self-expression; destruction of all hierarchy and elites, as if ideological repudiation has ever prevented or ever could prevent the formation and reformation of hierarchies and elites; condemnation of “illegitimate” authority in the absence of any notion of what might constitute legitimate authority; and, at the root of all, a thorough secularization of society, bolstered by the monstrous lie that the constitutional separation of church and state was meant to separate religion from society. And we have yet to reassess the anti-Americanism—the self-hatred implicit in the attitude we have generally affected toward our country—that has led us into countless stupidities and worse.

Let us give ourselves some credit: through it all we have preserved a rich sense of humor. The destruction of hierarchies, elites, and authority is to be effected through the concentration of power in a Leviathan state miraculously free of all such reactionary encumbrances.

No wonder liberals are ready to absolve us from our sins without first hearing our confession. No wonder we are witnessing the virtual fusion of left-liberalism and revolutionary radicalism in the wake of the collapse of the

The Question

socialist countries. For most left-wing liberals share with radicals much the same ideology of personal liberation. Radicals and conservatives alike have always charged liberals with bad faith in refusing to carry out the logic of their own egalitarian and radical-democratic premises. They have been right about the refusal but not necessarily about the bad faith. There are more charitable explanations, including a healthy gut revulsion by humane liberals against the substitution of logical consistency for common decency and common sense.

I have been piling up assertions and may be wrong on all counts. But am I wrong in believing that unless the left reopens these fundamental questions it will have no future and deserve none? The deepest trouble with "political correctness" arises from its thinly disguised invitation to an endless repetition of crimes, atrocities, and, worst of all, failures. Yes, worst of all the failures. For the deepening horror that Black America faces, to speak of no other impending horror, cannot be arrested by a morally bankrupt movement

with an appalling record of political and economic failure, no matter how many pyrrhic victories it piles up on deranged and degraded college campuses.

The left has been right to fight for social justice. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, no friend of ours, recently observed, "Although the earthly ideal of Socialism-Communism has collapsed, the problems it purported to solve remain: the brazen use of social advantage and the inordinate power of money, which often direct the very course of events" (*New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1993). Our indictment of class injustice, racism, and the denigration of women has not been rendered less urgent by the failure of socialism. The millions of our own martyred comrades who fought against those enormities need not have died in vain. But they will indeed have died in vain if we refuse to face our past squarely, subject our basic premises to stern review, own up to all that has gone wrong, and take the measures necessary to guarantee against the next round of the same old story.

On-Line with DISSENT

Upon the advice of several librarians, we have decided to stop printing a biennial index in the pages of *Dissent*. *Dissent* is now indexed in *Academic Abstracts*, the *Infotrak Academic Index*, *Magazine Article Summaries*, the *PAIS Bulletin*, University Microfilms, Inc. (UMI), the *Social Sciences Index*, and the *Social Science Source*. Readers and librarians who wish to receive a copy of the index for Volumes 39 and 40 of *Dissent* (Winter 1992 through Fall 1993) can write to *Dissent*, 521 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Please include 52¢ postage.