

Socialism and Liberalism: Articles of Conciliation?

It will surprise none of my readers to learn that after a reasonably diligent search I have not been able to find a serious attempt to bring together systematically the usual socialist criticisms of liberalism. The socialist criticisms of liberalism, though familiar enough in their general features, appear in the literature mainly through occasional passages, unquestioned references, rude dismissals, and, during the last few decades, a few wistful beckonings for reconciliation. What I propose to do here is to construct a synthesis, necessarily open to the charge that it is ahistorical, of the criticisms socialists have traditionally leveled against liberalism, and then to offer some remarks about possible future relations.

Socialists, who are they? and liberalism, what is it? I shall choose here to signify as socialist those thinkers and spokesmen who cannot be faulted as tender toward authoritarian regimes: I shall exclude Communists, Maoists, Castroites, as well as their hybrids, cousins, and reticent wooers. I shall assume that with regard to liberalism there has been some coherence of outlook among the various shades of socialist (and Marxist) opinion. But in talking about liberalism I shall be readier to acknowledge the complexities and confusions of historical actuality. And this for two reasons: first, that

liberalism is our main interest today; and second, that since a surplus of variables can paralyze analysis (eight kinds of socialism matched against six of liberalism yield how many combinations/confrontations?), I would justify taking one's sights from a more-or-less fixed position as a way of grasping a range of shifting phenomena.

In the socialist literature, though not there alone, liberalism has taken on at least the following roles and meanings:

1. Especially in Europe, liberalism has signified those movements and currents of opinion that arose toward the end of the 18th century, seeking to loosen the constraints traditional societies had imposed on the commercial classes and proposing modes of government in which the political and economic behavior of individuals would be subjected to a minimum of regulation. Social life came to be seen as a field in which an equilibrium of desired goods could be realized if individuals were left free to pursue their interests.¹ This, roughly, is what liberalism has signified in Marxist literature, starting with Marx's articles for the *Rheinische Zeitung* and extending through the polemics of Kautsky, Bernstein, and Luxemburg. In short: "classical" liberalism.

2. Both in Europe and America, liberalism has also been seen as a system of

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¹The philosophical underpinning is provided by Kant: "everyone is entitled to seek happiness in whatever manner seems best to him, provided that he does not interfere with the freedom of others to strive toward the same objective, which can coexist with the freedom of everyone else under a conceivable general law."

beliefs stressing such political freedoms as those specified in the U.S. Bill of Rights. Rising from the lowlands of interest to the highlands of value, this view of liberalism proposes a commitment to “formal” freedoms—speech, assembly, press, etc.—so that in principle, as sometimes in practice, liberalism need have no necessary connection with, or dependence upon, any particular way of organizing the economy.

3. Especially in 20th-century America but also in Europe, liberalism has come to signify movements of social reform seeking to “humanize” industrial-capitalist society, usually on the premise that this could be done sufficiently or satisfactorily without having to resort to radical/socialist measures—in current shorthand: the welfare state. At its best, this social liberalism has also viewed itself as strictly committed to the political liberalism of #2 above.

4. In America, sometimes to the bewilderment of Europeans, liberalism has repeatedly taken on indigenous traits that render it, at one extreme, virtually asocial and anarchic and, at the other extreme, virtually chiliastic and authoritarian. Perhaps because the assumptions of a liberal polity were so widely shared in 19th-century America (the slaveocracy apart), “liberal” as a term of political designation can hardly be found in its writings. When liberalism as a distinctive modern politics or self-designated ideological current begins to emerge in America—first through the high-minded reforming individualism of Edward Godkin, editor of the *Nation* during the 1880s and 1890s, and then through the social-nationalist progressivism of Herbert Croly, editor of the *New Republic* when it was founded in 1914—it becomes clear that it cannot escape a heritage of native individualism, utopianism, and “conscience-politics.” Nor can it escape the paradisiacal vision that is deeply lodged in the American imagination, going back to Emerson and Thoreau, and further back, perhaps, to the Puritans. Nor can it escape a heritage of Protestant self-scrutiny, self-reliance, and

self-salvation. Consequently American liberalism has a strand of deep if implicit hostility to politics *per se*—a powerful kind of moral absolutism, a celebration of conscience above community, which forms both its glory and its curse.

5. Meanwhile, through the decades, liberalism has encompassed a *Weltanschauung*, a distinctive way of regarding the human situation. Despite some recent attempts to render it profound through a gloomy chiaroscuro, liberalism has customarily been an expression of that view of man which stresses rationality, good nature, optimism, and even “perfectibility” (whatever that may mean). Whether or not there is a necessary clash between the Christian and liberal views of man, and despite some strains of continuity that may coexist with the differences, there can hardly be any question that historically, in its effort to gain its own space, liberalism has emerged as a competitor to traditional religious outlooks.

That there are other significant usages of the term “liberalism” I do not doubt; but for today these should be quite enough. Let me now schematically note some—by no means all—of the major socialist criticisms of at least some of these variants of liberalism:

- THE SOCIALIST criticism of “classical” liberalism (joined at points by that of conservative iconoclasts like Carlyle) seems by now to have been largely absorbed in our political culture—with the exception of such ideological eccentrics and utopians as Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, and the current President of the United States. That the historical conditions of early capitalist society made a mockery of any notion of free and equal competitors entering into free and equal exchange, with each employing his gifts and taking his risks; that large masses of people were excluded from the very possibility of significant social choice; that even “liberal” governments never quite practiced the noninterventionist principles of “clas-

sical” liberalism but in fact were actively engaged in furthering the growth of bourgeois economy; that the notion of “entitlement,” with its premise of some early point of fair beginnings, is mostly ideological—these have been the kinds of criticisms that socialists, and especially Marxists, have made of early liberalism.² The very world we live in—irreversible if inconvenient, and open to almost every mode of criticism except nostalgia for the alleged bliss of pure capitalism—testifies to the cogency of these socialist criticisms.

Yet that is by no means the whole story. One of the strengths of Marxist historiography (I shall come to weaknesses) has been that even while assaulting capitalism it saw the vitality of its early phases, and that even in the course of ridiculing “classical” liberalism as an ideological rationale for bourgeois ascendancy, it honored its liberating role in behalf of humanity at large. The early Marx—he who could write that “laws are positive and lucid universal norms in which freedom has attained an impersonal, theoretical existence independent of any arbitrary individual. A statute book is the people’s Bible of freedom”; or who could write that “without parties there is no development, without

division, no progress”—this early Marx clearly recognized his ties to, or descent from, the liberalism he subjected to attack and sought to “transcend.”

Socialists—let us be honest: some socialists—have recognized that in its heroic phase liberalism constituted one of the two or three greatest revolutionary experiences in human history. The very idea of “the self” or “the individual,” quintessential to modern thought and sensibility, simply could not have come into being without the fructifying presence of liberalism. The liberalism that appears in 18th-century Europe promises a dismissal of intolerable restraints; speaks for previously unimagined rights; declares standards of sincerity and candor; offers the vision that each man will have his voice and each voice be heard. It would be making things too easy (at least for me) to say that socialism emerges unambiguously out of this tradition. Obviously, there have been authoritarian alloys in the socialist metals; but when the socialist imagination is at its most serious, it proposes a dialectical relationship to “classical” liberalism: a refusal, on the one hand, of quasi-Benthamite rationales for laissez-faire economics and a pact in behalf of preserving and enlarging the boundaries of freedom.

²In *Capital*, I, Marx applies his powers of sarcasm to such assumptions of “classical” liberalism: “The sphere of circulation and exchange of commodities within which labor is bought and sold was in reality a paradise of innate human rights—governed entirely by freedom, equality, property, and Bentham! Freedom! Because the buyers and sellers of a commodity, such as labor-power, are constrained only according to their own free will. They enter into a contract as free and legally equal free agents. The contract is the final result in which their common free will is given common legal expression. Equality! Because their relationships with one another are purely those of the owners of commodities and they exchange like for like. Property! Because each individual makes use only of what belongs to him. Bentham! Because each of the two thinks only of himself. The only power that holds them together and establishes a relationship between them is their egotism, personal advantage, and private interest. And precisely because each individual thinks of himself and never of anyone else, they all work toward their mutual advantage, the general good and common interest, in accordance with a preestablished harmony of things or under the auspices of a cunning knowing providence.”

- BOTH IN some early efforts at Marxist scholarship and in recent academic revivals, socialists have charged against liberalism that its defenders elevate it to a supra-historical abstraction, an absolute value presumably untainted by grubby interests or bloodied corruptions, whereas in actuality liberalism, like all other modes of politics, arose as a historically conditioned and thereby contaminated phenomenon, and hence must be regarded as susceptible to historical decay and supercession.

Now, if we see this matter mainly as one of historiography, there is a point to the socialist criticism. No political movement, not even liberalism, likes to have the time of its origins deglamorized, yet there is sufficient reason for subjecting all movements to that chastening procedure. But with regard

to a living politics, this criticism is dangerous and has done a share of mischief.

The tendency of some Marxists to regard liberal ideas as mainly or merely epiphenomena of a historical moment always runs the risk of declining into an absolutist relativism, that is, a historicism that acknowledges no fixed point of premise other than its own strategies of deflation. A sophisticated analogue is the "sociology of knowledge"; a vulgar reduction, the habit of speaking about "*mere* bourgeois democracy." This mode of historical analysis ignores the possibility that even movements and currents of thought conditioned by class interest can yield ideas, traditions, methods, customs that will seem of permanent value to future generations. There may not be unimpeded progress in history, but there do seem to be a few permanent conquests. To show that the principles of a liberal polity did not descend from Mount Sinai but arose together with social classes whose dominance we would like to see ended or curtailed is not at all to deny that those liberal principles are precious both to newly ascending classes and humanity at large. To show that the Founding Fathers of the United States represented commercial interests or kept slaves or, when in office, violated some of their own precepts is not at all to diminish the value of the Bill of Rights for people who despise commercial interests, abhor slavery, and propose, if in power, never to violate their own precepts. Criticism of Jefferson's inadequacies is made possible by the adequacy of Jeffersonian principles.

If these remarks seem excessively obvious, we might remember that the history of 20th-century politics, as also that of the 20th-century intelligentsia, offers scant ground for resting securely in a common devotion to liberal values. Quite the contrary! We are living through a century of counterrevolution, one in which the liberal conquests of the 19th century, inadequate as these might have been, have been systematically destroyed by left-and-right authoritarian dictatorships. "Vulgar Marxism," with its quick reduction of ideas to ideology and its glib ascription of

ideology to interest, has become the mental habit of lazy and half-educated people throughout the world.³ In general, by now we ought to be extremely wary of all statements featuring the word "really"—as in "Mill's ideas really represent the interests of the British, etc., etc." and "Freud's ideas really reflect the condition of the Viennese, etc., etc." Statements of this kind are, no doubt, unavoidable and sometimes fruitful, but they have too often come to be damaging to both the life of the mind and a polity of freedom.

Insofar, then, as the socialist criticism of liberalism has furthered an element of historical reductionism—unavoidable, I suspect, in the context of a mass movement—it has weakened the otherwise valid insistence that liberalism be treated as part of mundane history and thereby subject to mundane complications.

• A POWERFUL socialist criticism of liberalism has been that it has detached political thought and practice from the soil of shared, material life, cutting politics off from the interplay of interests, needs, and passions that constitutes the collective life of mankind. A linked criticism has been that liberalism lacks an adequate theory of power, failing to see the deep relationships between political phenomena and alignments of social class. (Kenneth Minogue makes the point vividly: "The adjustment of interest conception [intrinsic to contemporary liberalism] . . . omits the crunch of truncheon on skull which always lies just in the background of political life . . .") Still another linked criticism, in the line of Rousseau, proposes that modern man is torn apart by a conflict

³Occasionally, there are counterinstances suggesting that "vulgar Marxism" may meet with correction from within traditions it has debased. A leader of the Spanish Communist party, one Luis, is quoted in the *New York Times* of October 29, 1975, saying: "We do not renounce a single one of the bourgeois liberties. If the bourgeoisie can dominate in freedom we want to provide more profound, more real liberties, not less. Socialism can provide the economic base for more complete liberty, without restricting a single aspect of bourgeois liberty." How much credence, if any, to give to this man's claim to democratic belief I do not know; but the fact that he speaks as he does must be regarded as significant.

between the liberal acceptance of bourgeois institutions, which sanction the pursuit of selfish-interest without regard to a larger community, and the liberal doctrine of popular sovereignty, which implies that the citizen must set aside private interests and concern himself with the common welfare.

Here, surely, it must be acknowledged that the socialist criticism—in fairness it has also been made by nonsocialists—has all but completely conquered, indeed taken effect so strongly as to become absorbed into the thought even of those who oppose socialism and/or Marxism. Almost every sophisticated (and thereby, soon enough, unsophisticated) analysis of society now takes it for granted that politics must be closely related to, and more or less seen as a reflection of, social interest; that society forms a totality in which the various realms of activity, though separable analytically, are intertwined in reality; that no segment of the population can be assumed any longer to be mute or passive, and that there has appeared a major force, the working class, which must be taken into historical account; and that the rationalism of most liberal theory, though not (one hopes) simply to be dismissed, must be complicated by a recognition of motives and ends in social behavior that are much richer, more complicated, and deeply troubling.⁴

⁴A word about the role of the working class in socialist thought, as it contrasts with the frequent claims of liberalism to rise “above” mere class interest. Granted the common criticism that Marxism has overestimated the revolutionary potential of the workers; granted that socialist rhetoric has sometimes romanticized the workers. It nevertheless remains that a major historical and moral conquest of the socialist movement, especially in the 19th century, was to enable the same passion—the masses of the lowly to enter the stage of history and acquire a historical consciousness. Few developments in the last two centuries have so decisively helped the consolidation of democratic institutions; few have so painfully been exploited to violate democratic norms. It would be foolish to say that socialism alone should take credit for the entry of “the masses” into political life; but it was the socialists who gave this entry a distinct moral sanction. At its best, socialism enabled the formation of that impressive human type we know as the self-educated worker in the late 19th century. That the rise of the working class to articulation and strength could, nevertheless, be exploited for authoritarian ends is surely a major instance of the tragedy of progress.

Both in our efforts to understand history and affect politics, there has occurred a “thickening” of our sense of society—indeed, the very idea of society, itself largely a 19th-century invention, testifies to that “thickening.” We might even say that as a result of Marx there has occurred a recreation of social reality. (The Christian historian Herbert Butterfield praises the Marxist approach to history in a vivid phrase: “it hugs the ground so closely”—which in his judgment does not prevent it from surveying what occurs in the upper reaches.) It is very hard—though some people manage—still to see politics as a mere exercise for elites, or an unfolding of first principles; it is very hard still to see politics apart from its relation to the interaction of classes, levels of productivity, modes of socioeconomic organization, etc. Writing in 1885 about his early work Engels says:

While I was in Manchester, it was tangibly brought home to me that the economic facts, which have so far played no role or only a contemptible one in the writing of history, are, at least in the modern world, a decisive historical force; that they form the basis of the origination of the present-day class antagonisms; that these class antagonisms, in the countries where they have become fully developed, thanks to large-scale industry, hence especially in England, are in their turn the basis of the formation of political parties and party struggles, and thus of all political history.

If the germs of reductionism can be detected in such a passage, so too can the possibilities for complication and nuance: all depends on which clause one chooses to stress. These possibilities for complication and nuance were seized only a dozen years later by Emile Durkheim:

I consider extremely fruitful the idea that social life should be explained, not by the notions of those who participate in it, but by more profound causes which are unperceived by consciousness, and I think also that these causes are to be sought mainly in the manner according to which the associated individuals are grouped.

Anyone wishing to trace the development

of modern thought—among other things, from socialism to sociology—could do worse than start with gloss on these passages from Engels and Durkheim.

The “economism,” real or apparent, of the Engels passage was followed by a vulgarization in popular Marxist writings, but there is also present in the Marxist tradition another—and for our time crucial—view of the relation between state and society. In his earlier and middle years especially, Marx saw that the state could possess or reach an autonomy of its own, rising “above” classes as a kind of smothering Leviathan. (The state in Louis Napoleon’s France, wrote Marx, is “an appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores.”) This perception could be crucial for a reconciliation between socialists and liberals—we shall come back to it.

• YET, FROM the vantage point of the late 20th century, it ought to be possible for socialists to be self-critical enough to admit that the victory over liberalism with regard to such matters as the relationship between politics and society, state and economy, has by no means been an unambiguous one, certainly not a victory to bring unqualified satisfaction. Apart from reductionism, I would raise a point that seems to me increasingly important but for which my own tradition offers an inadequate vocabulary. I have in mind what might be called the body of traditional political wisdom, or the reflections of thoughtful men on the “perennial” problems of politics. To speak of “perennial” problems, I want to insist, is to locate them within a historical continuum rather than to elevate them “above” history.

In its historicist relativizing, its absorption with a particular social circumstance, the socialist tradition has given rather short shrift to this body of traditional political reflection. A pity! Marx might have been unsympathetic to Madison’s reflections in *The Federalist Papers* regarding the dynamics of faction in a republic; perhaps he

would have seen them as excessively abstract or as a rationale for class interest. Yet both of these criticisms could have been cogent without necessarily undermining the value of what Madison said. The socialist movement has sinned and suffered from its impatience with the accumulated insights of the centuries regarding political life. As a result, despite its prolonged attention to politics and its often brilliant analyses of political strategy (from Marx in the *18th Brumaire* to Trotsky on pre-Hitler Germany), the socialist tradition has lacked, or refused, a theory of politics as an autonomous or at least distinct activity. It has had little or nothing to say about such matters as necessary delimitations of power, the problems of representation, the uses or misuses of a division of authority, the relation between branches of government, etc.

Let me cite a fascinating example. In late 1874 and early 1875 Marx read Bakunin’s book *Statism and Anarchy*, made extended extracts and attached to these his own sharply polemical comments. Bakunin was anticipating one of the questions endlessly rehearsed by writers of the nonauthoritarian left: how to prevent the bureaucratization of a “workers’ state,” whether exworkers raised to power would become corrupted, etc., etc. Bakunin writes that

universal suffrage—the right of the whole people—to elect its so-called representatives and rulers of the State—this is the last word of the Marxists as well as of the democratic school. And this is a falsehood behind which lurks the despotism of a governing minority. . . . But this minority, say the Marxists, will consist of workers. Yes, indeed, of *ex-workers*, who, once they become rulers or representatives of the people, cease to be workers. . . .

At which point Marx interrupts: “No more than does a manufacturer today cease to be a capitalist on becoming a city councilman.” Continues Bakunin: “From that time on they [the ex-workers] represent not the people but themselves and their own claims to govern the people. Those who doubt this know precious little about human nature.”

One need not acquiesce in Bakunin's hostility to democratic institutions in order to see that, in his own way, he has hit upon one of the "perennial" problems in political thought—the problem of representation, how the elected representative of a group or class can become corrupted or bureaucratized upon acquiring power. Marx's answer seems to me unsatisfactory: the manufacturer representing his class in a city council, though obviously susceptible to corruption, is not expected to help usher in a new, socialist era, he need only defend particularistic interests—while the worker elected to office in a "worker's state" is burdened, according to the Marxist prescription, with great historical and moral responsibilities, thereby rendering the problems of corruption and bureaucratism all the more acute. Surely Marx was able to understand this!—but what made it hard for him to respond to such matters with sufficient seriousness was a historical method, an ideological bent, a political will.

Yet, hidden within the class analyses of the Marxists there have remained—a Marxist analysis of Marxism might suggest that there *must* remain—elements of traditional political thinking. Lenin, the one Marxist writer most impatient with talk about "perennial" problems, seems nevertheless to recognize in *State and Revolution* that a theory focusing upon change must also take into account continuity. He writes:

Men . . . liberated from capitalist exploitation will gradually become accustomed to abide by the elementary rules of social life which have been known from time immemorial and have been set out for thousands of years in all regulations, and they will follow these rules without force, compulsion, subservience, and the special apparatus of compulsion which is known as the state.

One wants to reply: but if there are "elementary rules of social life . . . known from time immemorial," rules which can be fully realized only in a classless society, then it must follow that in earlier, class-dominated societies those rules became manifest in some

way, otherwise we could not recognize their existence. There are, then, "perennial" problems of politics, by no means so "elementary" either—considering the fact that they have never been solved, nor seem likely ever to be entirely solved. And these problems cannot be dismissed by references to class or historical contexts, though obviously class or historical contexts give them varying shape and significance. They are problems, it might be acknowledged, that have been discussed with greater depth, because more genuine interest, by conservatives and liberals than by socialists.

The Marxist/socialist criticism of liberalism regarding the relation of politics to society now seems less cogent, or at least requires greater complication, than it did half a century ago. And this for an additional reason: with the growth of the modern industrial state, in both its Western and Eastern versions, politics takes on a new primacy, indeed, a kind of "independence," vis-à-vis the institutions and mechanisms of the economy. In the Communist countries, what happens to the economy, what is done with one or another segment of the working class, how the peasants are treated in the kolkhoz: all stem from political decision. Far from the ruling Party bureaucracy being a mere agency of, or even (as Trotsky believed) a parasite upon, one of the social classes, the Party bureaucracy is the decisive sociopolitical force in the country, akin to, even if not quite like, a ruling class. State and society tend to merge in totalitarian countries, so that traditional discriminations between politics and economics come to seem of little use.

In advanced capitalist countries, the state increasingly takes over crucial functions of the market, while still allowing a considerable measure of autonomy to corporations and private business. These developments have been noted frequently and need not be elaborated here; suffice it to say that insofar as they persist, some of the apparently sealed conclusions from the long debate between liberalism and socialism need to be reopened. The traditional liberal

notions of politics cannot, of course, be exhumed, but neither can the traditional socialist objections to them be repeated with confidence. What can be said, tentatively, is that the liberal insistence upon politics as a mode of autonomous human action with “laws” and “rules” of its own has come to have a new persuasiveness and, not least of all, within socialist thought.

- THERE IS a criticism of liberal politics and thought that runs through the whole of the socialist literature but, by now, can also be heard at many points to the right and left of liberalism: among “organicist” conservatives, followers of the young Marx, Christian socialists, syndicalists, communitarian New Leftists. This criticism is most often expressed as a defense of the values of community—human fellowship, social grouping—against egotism, competition, private property. Necessarily, it raises questions about the quality of life in bourgeois society: the failure of a common culture, the burdens placed upon the family when people lack alternative spheres of cooperative activity, the breakdown of social discipline that follows from *laissez faire*. This criticism also takes a political form: the argument that democracy requires public life, that it cannot be successfully maintained in a society of privatized persons whose interests are confined to their families and businesses, and that public life depends upon a sharing of political and economic goods. Does it not seem likely that some of the ills of American society follow from the situation described in this attack upon classical liberalism?

The idea of economic man is declared to be a libel upon humanity; the vision of extreme individualism, an impoverishment of social possibility; and the kind of life likely to emerge from a society devoted to such ideas, a terrible drop from traditional humanist and Christian standards.

Most thoughtful liberals have by now acknowledged the force of this criticism. Indeed, there is rather little in it that cannot

be found in John Stuart Mill’s essays on Bentham and Coleridge. In the long run, then, freedom of criticism does seem to yield some benefits: does seem to prompt spokesmen for major political-intellectual outlooks to complicate and modify their thought. Liberal criticism has made a difference in socialism; socialist criticism, in liberalism.

Still, who does not feel the continued poignancy in the yearning for community, which seems so widespread in our time? Who does not respond, in our society, to the cry that life is poor in shared experiences, vital communities, free brother (sister) hoods?

Yet precisely the pertinence and power of this attack upon traditional liberalism must leave one somewhat uneasy. For we must remember that we continue to live in a time when the yearning for community has been misshaped into a gross denial of personal integrity, when the desire for the warmth of social bonds—marching together, living together, huddling together, complaining in concert—has helped to betray a portion of the world into the shame of the total state.

One hears, these days, celebrations of the fact that in Communist China large masses of people actively “participate” in the affairs of state. They do. And it is not necessary to believe they always do so as a response to terror or force in order to be persuaded that the kind of “participation” to which they yield themselves is a denial of human freedom.

Let us be a little more cautious, then, in pressing the attack upon liberalism that invokes an image of community—a little more cautious if only because this attack is so easy to press. There is indeed an element of the paltry in the more extreme versions of liberal individualism; but the alienation that has so frequently, and rightly, been deplored in recent decades may have its sources not only in the organization of society but in the condition of mankind. Perhaps it is even to be argued that there is something desirable in recognizing that, finally, nothing can fully protect us from the loneliness of our selves.

A social animal, yes; but a solitary creature too. Socialists and liberals have some areas of common interest in balancing these two stresses, the communal and the individual, the shared and the alone. It is a balance that will tilt; men and women must be free to tilt it.

- FUNCTIONING FOR a good many decades as an opposition movement, and one, moreover, that could not quite decide whether it wished to be brought into society or preferred to seek a “total” revolutionary transformation, the socialist movement systematically attacked liberalism for timidity, evasiveness, vacillation, “rotten compromise,” etc. It charged that liberalism was weak, that it never dared to challenge the socioeconomic power of the bourgeoisie, that it was mired in what Trotsky called “parliamentary cretinism,” etc.

The historical impact of this criticism can hardly be overestimated. A major source of the “welfare state,” insofar as we have one, has surely been the pressure that socialist movements have exerted upon a liberalism that has long gone past its early elan. Insofar as the socialist criticism served to force liberalism into awareness of and militancy in coping with social injustice, the results have been for the better.

But also—for the worse. For the socialist criticism (as the rise of bolshevism and its various offshoots make clear) contained at least two strands: one that disdained liberalism for its failure to live up to its claims and one that disdained liberalism for its success in living up to its claims. We touch here upon a great intellectual scandal of the age: the tacit collaboration of right and left in undermining the social and moral foundations of liberalism. In the decades between the Paris Commune and World War II both right- and left-wing intellectuals were gravely mistaken, and morally culpable, in their easy and contemptuous dismissal of liberalism. That the society they saw as the tangible embodiment of bourgeois liberalism required scathing criticism I do not doubt. But they

failed utterly to estimate the limits of what was historically possible in their time, as they failed, even more importantly, to consider what the consequences might be of their intemperate attacks upon liberalism. It was all very well to denounce liberalism as what Ezra Pound called—Lenin would have agreed—“a mess of mush”; but to assault the vulnerable foundations of liberal democracy meant to bring into play social forces the intellectuals of both right and left could not foresee. There were, as it turned out, far worse things in the world than “a mess of mush.”

Bourgeois Europe was overripe for social change by the time of World War I. But the assumptions that such change required a trampling on liberal values in the name of hierarchical order or proletarian dictatorship and that liberal values were inseparable from cultural decadence and capitalist economy—these assumptions proved a disaster. In the joyful brutality of their verbal violence many intellectuals, at both ends of the political spectrum, did not realize how profound a stake they had in preserving the norms of liberalism. They felt free to sneer at liberalism because, in a sense, they remained within its psychological orbit; they could not really imagine its destruction and took for granted that they would continue to enjoy its shelter. Even the most authoritarian among them could not foresee a situation in which *their* freedom would be destroyed. Dreaming of natural aristocrats or sublime proletarians, they helped pave the way for maniac *lumpen*.

- STILL ANOTHER socialist/radical criticism of liberalism, familiar from polemics of the '30s but urgently revived during the last decade by the New Left, is that the structure of liberties in democratic society rests on a shared acquiescence in the continued power of the bourgeoisie; that these liberties survive on condition they not be put to the crucial test of basic social transformation—and that they might well be destroyed by the bourgeoisie or its military agencies if a

serious effort were made by a democratically elected government to introduce socialist economic measures. The overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile has been cited as a telling confirmation.

It is an old problem. Marx and Engels suggested that a socialist transition in such countries as England and Holland, with their deep-rooted democratic traditions, might be peaceful. Most other European countries not yet having completed the “bourgeois revolution” by the mid-19th century, it seemed reasonable to the founders of “scientific socialism” that revolutionary methods might be necessary on the continent—though we also know that later, when the German Social Democracy became a mass party, Engels accepted the parliamentary course. The standard Bolshevik gloss would soon be that since the time Marx and Engels had written, the bourgeois state in England and Holland had grown more powerful, developing a traditional apparatus of repression. Thereby, the expectation of peaceful transition had become obsolete.

I think it would be an error to dismiss the Marxist criticism on this point as outmoded or irrelevant. Changes in class rule have in the past rarely come about without one or another quantity of violence, and as I remember hearing and saying in my youth, ruling classes don’t just fold up their tents and slink away. By the same token, I now reply to my younger self, past changes in class rule have rarely, if ever, taken place within established democratic societies, hence could not be said to provide a test of the socioeconomic strains democratic societies can be expected to sustain.

To insist that liberalism and/or liberties must collapse under a serious effort to introduce socialist measures signifies

(a) an unfortunate concession to those right-wing ideologues who insist that political liberty is inseparable from and could not survive the destruction of private property; or

(b) a vision of socialist transformation so “total” and apocalyptic that the collapse of

political liberties in such circumstances could as readily be the work of revolutionary insurgents as of a resistant bourgeoisie. (To concede, after all, that liberalism could not survive a “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the Leninist or Leninist-Stalinist versions is hardly very damaging to the claim that liberalism can coexist with more than one form of economy.)

As for the historical evidence, it seems inconclusive and mixed. A very great deal, perhaps everything, depends on the strength of attachment among a people to democratic values; only a bit less, on the ability of a given society to avoid the kind of economic cataclysms that would put this attachment under excessive strain. If, say, the social democratic governments of Scandinavia and England, ruling with substantial majorities and elected as parties pledged to go considerably beyond welfare-state measures, were to introduce extensive socialist measures, there is not much reason to expect major extra-legal efforts to undo their policies.⁵ For the tradition of pacific social life and “playing by the rules” seems strong enough in such countries to allow one to envisage a major onslaught against the power of corporations and large business without risking the survival of democracy.

(I referred a few sentences back to governments with substantial majorities. It seems reasonable, after all, that a government that squeaks into office with a narrow margin should exercise restraints in any effort to introduce major social change.)

At least in some “advanced” European countries, the problem would not seem to be the bourgeoisie itself—by now a class without an excess of self-confidence. Socialist anxiety as to the ability of a liberal

⁵Harold Laski, in his *Parliamentary Government in England*, questioned whether democracy could survive if a Labor government came to power and legislated a socialist program. In 1945 a Labor government did come to power and legislated, if not a socialist program, then a huge welfare-state program decidedly akin to, or at least pointing the way toward, socialism. And democracy did not collapse. This does not yet “prove” that Laski was wrong; only that it would be unwise to assume that he was right.

society to absorb major change might more appropriately be directed toward the middle classes and the army, which can no longer be assumed to act (if ever they did) as mere pliant agents and accomplices of the bourgeoisie. It is by no means clear that the Chilean experiences "prove" that a democratic path to socialism is impossible. What it may prove is

(a) that a left-wing government trying to maintain democratic norms while introducing major social change must be especially sensitive to the interests and sentiments of the middle class; and

(b) that the army, acting out of its own interests and sentiments, can become an independent political force, establishing a dictatorial regime that it might well be a mistake to see as a mere creature of bourgeois restoration.

The role of armies in contemporary politics is a fascinating problem, beyond discussion here. Except for this: in a variety of circumstances, but especially where a mutual weakening of antagonistic classes has occurred, the army (like the state) can take on an unexpected autonomy. Nor is it clear that this follows the traditional Marxist expectation that the army would be employed by the ruling class to save its endangered interests. Even if that was true in Chile, it was not in Peru. And in sharply different ways, it is not true either in Portugal or Greece. In Asian and African countries, the role of the army is evidently that of a makeshift power compensating for the feebleness of all social classes. There is, then, something new here, not quite anticipated in liberal or socialist thought.

The question whether a liberal democratic regime can peacefully sustain major social or socialist changes remains open. If a categorical negative is unwarranted, so too is an easy reassurance. Given the probable configuration of politics in the Western democracies, there is some reason to conclude that even left-socialist regimes staying within democratic limits would have to proceed more cautiously, with greater respect

for the multiplicity of group interests, than the usual leftist expectations have allowed. And the anxiety provoked by a possible effort to combine liberal polity with socialist economy remains a genuine anxiety, shared by both liberals and socialists.

- IF WE CONFINE ourselves to the "advanced" countries, one criticism socialists have come increasingly to make of liberalism is that it fails to extend sufficiently its democratic concerns from the political to the economic realm.⁶ Early in the century the distinguished British liberal writer L.T. Hobhouse put the matter elegantly: "liberty without equality is a name of noble sound and squalid result." I will not linger on this point except to note:

(a) It suggests that the difference between social liberalism and democratic socialism keeps growing smaller, so that at some point it may become no more than incremental. Both traditional liberal thinkers and Marxist theoreticians would deny this; a good many social democrats, in effect, believe it.

(b) It leaves aside what in a fuller consideration could not be left aside: that there remain serious liberal criticisms of socialist proposals, e.g., that efforts to legislate greater equality of wealth, income, and power in economic life will seriously impair political liberty, and that the statist version of socialism (the only realistic one, say some liberal critics) would bring about a fearful concentration of power.

(c) We may be ready to subscribe to the socialist criticism that modern liberalism fails sufficiently to extend its democratic concerns to economic life—e.g., the governance of corporations; we may also share the socialist

⁶A criticism anticipated in general terms by the early Marx: "Political emancipation is indeed a great step forward. It is not, to be sure, the final form of universal human emancipation, but it is the final form *within* the prevailing order of things. . . . Where the political state has achieved its full development, man leads a double life, a heavenly and an earthly life, not only in thought or consciousness but in *actuality*. In the *political community* he regards himself as a *communal being*; but in *civil society* he is active as a *private individual*, treats other men as means, reduces himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers."

desire for greater participation of the masses in political and economic decision-making; but, to turn things around, I would largely accept the liberal dislike for schemes involving “mass” or “direct” democracy. Such schemes, insofar as they would brush aside representative institutions (elections, parliaments, etc.) in favor of some sort (but which sort?) of “direct” or “participatory” rule, are likely to end up as hopelessly vague or as prey to demagogic techniques for manipulating those who “participate” in movements, meetings, plebiscites, etc. If the survival of democracy depends on greater popular participation, greater popular participation by no means insures or necessarily entails the survival of democracy. Under modern conditions representative institutions are indispensable to democratic societies; any proposals for “transcending” them, even if they come through socialist goodwill, should be regarded with suspicion.

- THERE IS, finally, the plenitude of attacks directed against liberalism along a spectrum of positions ranging from the reactionary to the revolutionary, most of them chastising its “deeper” failures as a philosophical outlook. So copious is this literature, there is hardly a need to cite texts or authorities.

Liberalism, we are told, accepts an egalitarianism that a day or two spent with open eyes in our mass society shows to be insupportable—while a sage like Professor Leo Strauss makes clear the traditional warrants and esoteric virtues of hierarchy. Liberalism proposes a belief in rational harmony, the “illusion” (to quote Kenneth Minogue) “of ultimate agreement” among men, “and perhaps most central of all, the idea that will and desire can ultimately be sovereign in human affairs”—while a sage like Professor Michael Oakeshott tells us that life is muddle, efforts at rational structuring of our affairs are likely to lead to still greater muddle, even, perhaps, to tyranny. Liberalism congeals into the simplistic notion, as Lionel Trilling has written, “that the life of man can be nicely

settled by correct social organization, or short of that, by the election of high moral attitudes.” Liberalism, focusing obsessively upon change, distracts us from the essentials of existence largely beyond the grasp of mere reason or public agency. Liberalism has a false view of the human situation, refusing to take into account the irrationalities and aggressions of our nature. (How can a liberal cope with the realities of the Hobbesian jungle? What can a good-hearted liberal make of the Freudian view of the human heart?) Liberalism ignores or dispatches the tragic sense of life, turning people away from that suffering which is unavoidable (perhaps even good?) in our experience. Liberalism replaces the warming cohesion of traditional communities with a rootless anonymity. Liberalism cannot cope with the mysteries of death, as Christianity does through its myth of resurrection, or existentialism tries, through its unblinking gaze into the void.

What is one to say of these criticisms? That often they confuse the historical genesis of liberalism, accompanied as it was by excessive claims, with later and more realistic versions of liberalism; that the alleged rootlessness of liberal man, though clearly surrounded with difficulties, also has brought unprecedented freedoms and opportunities, indeed, entire new visions of the personal self; that the increasing stress of modern liberal thought upon a pluralist society indicates at least some recognition of clashing interests, irreconcilable needs, confrontations of class; that a recognition of the irrational and aggressive components of human conduct can become an argument in favor of limitations upon power favored by liberalism; that we may recognize weaknesses and limitations in liberalism as a *Weltanschauung*—indeed, refuse to see it as a *Weltanschauung*—while still fervently believing that a liberal polity allows for the best realization of human diversity and freedom; that there is no necessary conflict between “dark” views of the human condition and an acceptance of the liberal style in public life.

Let us grant, then, some of the criticisms made of liberal afflatus (usually in the past) and liberal smugness (usually in the present), and admit, as well, the probability that insofar as men need religious myths and rites to get through their time on earth, liberalism is not likely to offer enough satisfaction. What needs to be stressed, all the same, is that a commitment to the liberal style in politics does not necessarily imply a commitment to a total world view claiming to include all experience from private fantasy to public authority. (Perhaps we would all be better off to live, for a time, without total world views.)

Toward these and similar exchanges between liberalism and its critics, socialists have shown a very wide range of responses. The more extreme leftist tendencies, verging on the authoritarian and chiliastic, have been tempted to borrow some of the arguments of the right, especially those releasing contempt for the flaccid moderation of liberalism, its alleged failures to confront painful realities of social life and human nature. But for those socialists who largely accept the premises of a liberal polity, there are other problems, notably the disconcerting fact that the bulk of the philosophical-existential criticism directed against liberalism can be brought to bear with equal cogency against social democracy.

Unavoidably, this leads to the question: apart from whatever capacity both liberalism and social democracy show for handling our socioeconomic difficulties, how well can they cope with—I choose deliberately a portentous term—the crisis of civilization that many people feel to be encompassing our lives? The crisis of civilization that besets the 20th century has to do, in part, with a breakdown in the transmission and common acceptance of values—which may also be a way of saying, with residual but powerful yearnings toward transcendence. Insofar as this occurs, there follows a pervasive uncertainty as to the “meanings” and ends of existence. One sign of this crisis is the resurgence in Western society of a strident

contempt for the ethic of liberal discourse and the style of rationality. Partly this arises from the mixed failings and successes of the welfare state, but partly from an upswell of ill-understood religious sentiments that, unable to find a proper religious outlet, become twisted into moral-political absolutism, a hunger for total solutions and apocalyptic visions. Impatience with the sluggish masses, burning convictions of righteousness, the suffocations of technological society, the boredom of overcrowded cities, the yearning for transcendent ends beyond the petty limits of group interest, romantic-sinister illusions about the charismatic virtues of dictatorship in underdeveloped countries—all these tempt intellectuals and semi-intellectuals into apolitical politics registering an amorphous revulsion from civilization itself.

The customary rationalism of earlier generations of socialists (and liberals too) could hardly grasp such a development. Yet, no matter how distant we may be from the religious outlook, we must ask ourselves whether the malaise of our time isn't partly a consequence of that despairing emptiness which has followed the breakup of traditional religious systems in the 19th century; whether the nihilism that sensitive people feel to be seeping through their lives may not itself testify to a kind of inverted religious aspiration; whether the sense of moral disorientation that afflicts us isn't due to the difficulties of keeping alive a high civilization without a sustaining structure of belief.

Perhaps, in honesty, there really is no choice but to live with the uncomfortable aftereffects of this disintegration of religious belief, which has brought not only the positive consequences some of us hoped for but also others that leave us discomfited. In any case, nothing seems more dubious than the impulse I detect these days among rightward-moving intellectuals: a willing of faith in behalf of alleged social-moral benefits. Here, finally, liberals and democratic socialists find themselves in the same boat, even if at opposite ends of it. The

Fabian course to which some of us are committed seems to me politically good and perhaps even realistic, but we ought to acknowledge that this course fails to stir the passions or speak to the needs of many people. We ought to acknowledge that between the politics we see as necessary and the expressive-emotional needs that break out recurrently in Western society there are likely to be notable gaps. I think, by way of homely instance, of a remark made to me a few years ago by a very decent and intelligent liberal professor: "But the politics of social democracy [he might also have said liberalism] are so boring!" It is a troubling remark, and one that may help explain why cultivated people of liberal training can be drawn to illiberal causes and impulses. We

can only worry about this matter, recognizing that it may be one of those instances where virtue entails formidable deficits.

But let me end on a somewhat more hopeful note. Half a century from now, one fact about our time may come to be seen as the most crucial. Whatever the separate or linked failures of liberalism and democratic socialism may be, there have come to us these past 20 or 25 years voices from the East superbly reasserting the values of freedom, tolerance, openness of discourse. These men and women have, thus far, "failed"; they have been destroyed, imprisoned, humiliated, isolated. Yet their very appearance signifies an enormous moral triumph for both liberalism and democratic socialism. Beneath the snow, the seed has lived. □

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