

Socialism and Cynicism

An Essay on Politics, Scholarship, and Teaching

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IT IS DIFFICULT to know whether socialists should be optimistic as the 1980s begin.

The "objective conditions" might seem favorable. The post-war period of economic expansion fostered rising expectations of prosperity and security. For many working-class and middle-class Americans, these hopes are now being dashed. The nation's global power began to erode in the 1970s and the repercussions are just now being felt. Corporations are asking people, as *Business Week* observed, to "do with less so that big business can have more."¹ Inflation weakens many people's purchasing power while gnawing underemployment saps their security about the future. The vast majority of the population can no longer afford the "American dream" of a single-family home. People fear an epidemic of cancer, a nuclear power accident, or a cold winter without heating fuel. As a result, the legitimacy of political institutions is seriously in question.

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For social change to be possible, people must believe that things *should* be different and that they *can* be different. Yet the prevailing mood in this country is one of *cynicism*. Feelings of distrust and anger toward the existing order have not created a belief in any constructive alternative. People generally believe that all politicians are corrupt, all institutions are impersonal, and all forms of society are equally bad. Therefore, it is fruitless to try to change the way things are. The popularity of narrowly personal solutions and accommodations—self-help psychology, off-beat religions, drugs (Valium is the nation's best-seller)—reflects fatalism and frustration about the possibilities of organized social change.

This mood is pervasive throughout the nation, including college campuses. Socialist teachers, particularly those veterans of the new left who came to political awareness in their student days, now face a generation of students with a different outlook and set of experiences. Eager to transmit the political lessons and Marxist scholarship of the past decade, they find it difficult to deal with students who have so little hope, and so much cynicism.

Many of those who now identify themselves as socialists reached adulthood during a period of economic expansion and political optimism. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, they took seriously the civics-book lessons about American society, democracy, social justice, equality, and freedom. They could be moved by John Kennedy's call to idealism (such as the Peace Corps) and the promises of liberalism. The unfolding reality stripped away their illusions and they felt betrayed. As cherished beliefs fell to the wayside, moral outrage turned to activism, which—in civil rights, anti-war, student, or feminist politics—led to a deeper, more critical analysis of American society. With the exception of "red diaper babies" from radical families, the new left's radicalism began with a sense of disillusionment. Their activism was an attempt to move the country back to the standards of democracy in which they had believed deeply.

Disillusionment requires illusions. But the past fifteen years—Vietnam, the energy crisis, the ghetto rebellions, Watergate, the women's movement—have stripped away many myths once taken for granted by most Americans. Among today's college students, there is little sense of disillusionment.

Public opinion surveys reveal a dramatic decline in confidence in major institutions. Investigative journalism fuels this attitude by regularly exposing corruption and irresponsibility within business, local government, labor unions, the Presidency, the Congress, and even the news media. Students now possess a healthy skepticism about pronouncements from established authority. Compare the enthusiasm for John Kennedy's moral crusade and even Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty with the suspicious reception that has greeted Jimmy Carter's "human rights" campaign and his promise that "I'll never lie to you."

Such skepticism, unfortunately, is accompanied by an even deeper cynicism. Youth's distrust of "politics" goes beyond the fact that fewer people than ever even bother to register or to vote. They sense that politics is something that they read about in the newspapers or see on TV, a series of promises by opportunistic politicians, a maze of indifferent bureaucrats administering endless programs that have little effect, a sideshow not to be taken too seriously. Ideologies are not to be trusted. Many students share a vague "anti-business" sensibility, and mistrust the self-serving claims of corporate advertising. The oil companies and nuclear power firms bear the brunt of this scorn, but few students buy the notion of "corporate responsibility" in general. Few place much value in the intrinsic worth of a "career" within the corporate world, but for lack of options, many are headed there anyway.

If the campuses were relatively quiet during the 1970s, it is not because students share the same outlook as the "silent generation" of the 1950s. Today's students, or at least the vast majority, have much less confidence about the future, but are (for the most part) resigned to it. They fight for grades and jobs, but place less value on what they are competing for.

Most distressing is their profound cynicism about "human nature," and about the possibility of creating a just society that meets human needs. They are reluctant to give in to idealism and hope, because they strongly suspect that their idealism will sooner or later be defeated and their hopes frustrated. Many, asked to envision a better society, are unable (or reluctant) to do so.

The American system is now amidst a "crisis of legitimacy." The protest movements of the 1960s and early 1970s can claim

some credit. Such an achievement would be a pyrrhic victory indeed if it failed to fuel another round of political activity and social change.

How can we apply the political and intellectual lessons of the past decade to this task? If socialist pedagogy is to be successful, it must come to grips with this generational chasm.

Naming the System

IN 1965, speaking at a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) anti-war demonstration, Paul Potter argued that the new left had to go beyond taking potshots at isolated problems and institutions. The time had come, he said, to "name the system."²

Today, fifteen years later, radicals have done more than name the system. They have analyzed it with a vengeance, using a wide variety of methods, perspectives, and styles. "Socialist" and "radical" ideas are making a comeback within the intellectual community. The mood and activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s produced a renewed interest in Marxist scholarship. Consider the lonely and isolated positions of Stanford economist Paul Baran and Columbia sociologist C. Wright Mills in the 1950s and early 1960s. Both would be astounded by the outpouring of books, journals, and popular writings from radical perspectives today.

The welfare state's liberal reforms of the past three decades, financed by corporate expansion, have come under assault from conservatives as "an excess of democracy" and from the left as "corporate liberalism."³ In this atmosphere, as in all periods of political and economic instability, the intellectual community has been pushed off-center. Most of the major liberal journals have shifted ground: the *New Republic* and *Commentary* further to the right, the *Nation* and *Progressive* to the left. Some liberals, such as Irving Kristol and Nathan Glazer, have become outspoken apologists for the capitalist system. Other liberals, such as Robert Dahl and Kenneth Arrow, now publicly identify themselves as socialists. Many other intellectuals have gone through similar transformations and many who were "apolitical" are now taking a stand or searching for something to stand on.

In this period of intellectual polarization, it is strange to recall that two decades ago sociologist S. M. Lipset wrote that "the

fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved; the workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state."⁴ As "the system" itself becomes the issue, and scholars take sides, their positions find their way into the classroom.

The popularity of *The Capitalist System*, an anthology edited by three young Marxist economists, provides an illustration. The first edition, published by Prentice-Hall in 1972, went through nine printings and was used in courses at 275 colleges. The second edition, published in 1978, promises to do even better, although it now faces competition from several other radical texts and readers in social-science courses.⁵

These books' breadth reveals an explosion of critical scholarship in the past decade. They cover, at different levels of difficulty and depth, the main issues confronting Marxist scholars: the expanding role of the state, the transformation of work and the class structure, the impact of capitalism on the family, women, minorities, and the environment.

The shelves of almost any college bookstore today show at least *some* evidence of these ideas. There are even enclaves of Marxist scholarship—the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), Livingston College of Rutgers, American University, the University of California at Santa Cruz and at Santa Barbara, SUNY Binghamton—where radicals are more than an isolated minority in one department. Organizations of radical historians, sociologists, political scientists, city planners, and economists publish their own journals, organize conferences, and caucus at meetings of their professions.

Leftist scholars are still a minority facing stiff obstacles in the hiring, promotion, and tenure process in an increasingly tight job market. Mainstream journals still ignore most neo-Marxist work but (perhaps due to competition from radical counterparts) have begun to open up slightly. The controversy surrounding the (eventually unsuccessful) appointment of Bertell Ollman as chair of the Politics Department at the University of Maryland is only one example of the ostracism of radicals and radical ideas, especially when they are accompanied by an "activist" orientation.

Nevertheless, one should not play down the growing legiti-

macy of critical ideas emerging from the academic world, radical think tanks, and leftist publications.

Spokespersons for business are clearly concerned about such goings-on. "Capitalism is not taught in American colleges," a worried business executive told the *New York Times*, "but you can go anywhere and take a course in Marxism."⁶ Newsweeklies devote articles to the growing popularity of Marxism on campus; they wonder aloud "Is Capitalism Working?" and try their best to discredit the socialist alternatives.⁷ They even express concern about the sales of Ollman's board game "Class Struggle." Business leaders and corporations are donating money to establish chairs and programs of "free enterprise" on campuses to offset what they perceive as an assault on business-oriented values. In their recent corporate advertising, they attempt to sell "the system," rather than simply selling products.

To the extent that radical ideas and perspectives are accepted, or at least discussed seriously, the left should feel a sense of success. Instead, many leftists seem more concerned that with success comes, inevitably, "co-optation." As radicals get teaching jobs, tenure, and even department chairships, some fear that they will only help to rationalize the system. As radical books win prizes and awards, and even make a profit for their publishers, some wonder if their ideas will lose their bite.

I am not worried that Marxism will become another commodity in the university's (or the media's) "marketplace of ideas." If that were to come about, we should welcome it. For the university to fulfill its stated purpose—to create more humanistic, critical, thoughtful citizens—it must allow students and faculty the freedom to scrutinize existing social arrangements and assumptions. An open university would allow the students the freedom to accept, or reject, *all* points of view. To do so, they must be exposed to Marxist ideas, as well as the realities of other social systems. Liberal democracy provides some room for such ideas, particularly during periods of social disruption, but today's campuses are not near allowing the degree of diversity and openness that business leaders worry about.

Still, in seeking to achieve greater awareness of Marxist ideas, we should be mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of this flowering of Marxist scholarship. There is not any necessary correlation between the number of radical books and radical profes-

sors (the circulation of left-wing ideas), on the one hand, and the "radicalization" of students, on the other. The latter requires a more complex, and more subtle, process, and a pedagogy that takes into account the experiences and outlooks of students raised during a profoundly depoliticizing period. My own sense is that much of what students learn from radical teachers reinforces their own cynicism.

Much of the radicalism of the 1960s was optimistic. Consider, for example, two of the first radical anthologies in sociology. Both Lindenfeld's *Radical Perspectives on Social Problems* (1968) and Deutsch and Howard's *Where It's At* (1970) reflected hopefulness about social change.⁸ Today, such ideas would be considered "naïve." As radical scholarship has become more "serious" and "sophisticated"—more historical, more comparative, more grounded in theory—it has also tended to shift political focus, to emphasize the systemic and deterministic aspects of the capitalist system and to play down the voluntaristic aspects of popular struggle.⁹ The optimism of the new left's academic writings reflected, in part, its engagement with the world outside the university. There was a certain "dare to struggle . . ." quality about it. As Marxism becomes more respectable as an academic pursuit, develops its own journals and organizations, and becomes the basis of careers and competition, there is the danger that it has lost touch with ongoing political activity.

Although there is now a great deal of political activity and grassroots stirring (discussed later), many academics are unable or unwilling to find a way to contribute. Some of it is personal—how do campus-based intellectuals relate to a community or workplace group of which they are not a part? Some of it is ideological—they write off much of what is happening as "reformist."

For many radicals within the university, political promise seemed to end at Kent State and Jackson State. This simply feeds into the students' view of "the sixties" as "the best of times," never to be repeated. Yet these socialists hold onto the radical critique of society that came out of that period. Thus, students get a large dose of "what's wrong" but little of "what's possible." Even students who agree are left holding the bag: "Okay. Capitalism stinks. Now what?"

They may agree that capitalism tramples people, but they see no alternative. If they accept that there is an alternative—social-

ism—they still wonder, how are we going to get there? And even if we managed to bring about a successful revolution, why should they believe that it wouldn't be corrupted? That's human nature.

While this profile is a caricature, I am certain that most readers will recognize aspects of their own experiences.

There is, however, another side. Many radical teachers seek to dispel the apathy or resignation of this generation of students by focusing on the other side of capitalism's coin—resistance and protest—through comparative analysis of successful and unsuccessful revolutions, rediscovery of courageous individuals and movements for social justice, serious discussion of strategies and tactics for “radical reform,” and discussion of what a more just and democratic society might look like.¹⁰

These activities are particularly important given the current mood. It is critical to impart to students the long history of resistance, rebellion, and reform that has accompanied capitalism at every stage. Although there are many ways to slice up this history, three approaches are primary. They can be termed “Third Worldism,” “People's History” (or “history from the bottom”), and “Socialist Incubators.” I will evaluate the potentials and pitfalls of each.

Third Worldism

IN A SOCIETY that sees itself as “middle class,” where the most brutal forms of degradation and poverty are hidden from many college students, it is difficult to attack advanced capitalism. It is much easier to criticize the activities in the third world of the governments of advanced capitalist nations and of multinational corporations. The widening gap between rich and poor, the hunger and malnutrition, the illiteracy and infant mortality, and the destruction of indigenous cultures are more blatant and more likely to evoke immediate sympathy and anger.

In addition, it is in the third world that the most persistent and successful challenges to capitalist domination have taken place. The postwar American left tended to focus its attention and enthusiasm on the revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, as well as on the liberation movements throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹¹ The American empire would be defeated

not at its core, but at its edges, where the contradictions were most severe. Radical analyses focused on the importance of access to raw materials in the third world, on the role of American militarism in propping up dictatorships, and on the activities of international financial agencies (World Bank, International Monetary Fund). The role of radicals in the advanced capitalist countries was, in this view, to support the anti-imperialist movements in the third world. Only the success of these struggles could set the stage for revolution at home. American radicals looked for lessons in the struggles against imperialism and the construction of socialism that they could apply at home “in the belly of the monster.”

Much of the emphasis on the third world has focused on the day-to-day process of building a socialist society. The struggle to create socialist men and women, to develop new forms of political, social, and economic participation, alerts us to the malleability of human nature. It illustrates the exhilarating possibilities of human liberation and the importance of human will in making history. The best sympathetic treatments of this process, such as Hinton's *Fanshen* (China) and Yglesias' *In the Fist of the Revolution* (Cuba), do not romanticize participants, explain away the violence, or simplify the paradoxes and obstacles in the transition to socialism. These works emphasize new relationships in the family, the workplace, the schools, the neighborhood, and the hospital, and force readers to confront the fact that alternatives *do* exist, that people *can* change and *make* history.

Once exposed to this evidence, few students can deny the extraordinary achievements of these socialist movements. For example, comparison of the accomplishments of China and India in solving the problems of malnutrition, illiteracy, population control, and health care, provides a stunning illustration of the bankruptcy of most theories of “modernization.”¹² Daily newspaper stories about the third world put in context help students to understand the biases of the news media and the strength of anti-imperialist and socialist movements.

Students often raise two objections to an analysis that focuses primarily on capitalism's exploitation of, and the building of socialism in, the third world. One is the view that “it's okay for them, but it wouldn't work here.” The other is reflected in the feeling that the third world will progress only at the expense

of the United States and thus "more for them means less for us."

The first view is the principal message of much of the popular media's reluctant acceptance of the fact that socialism's appeal, and its existence in much of the world, will not go away. It is also reflected in the familiar list of negatives associated with socialism, including its "lower standard of living," "rigidity and bureaucratization of everyday life," and "lack of democratic freedoms."

There are many ways to respond. Nations emerging from a history of "backwardness" cannot immediately attain the level of industrialization of the advanced capitalist nations. One can analyze the problems of consolidating power in order to plan, coordinate, and mobilize. One can discuss the constraints on socialist countries operating within (and opposed by) a capitalist world economy. One can evaluate the different standards of "democracy" in socialist and capitalist countries. But these answers do not address themselves directly, nor adequately, to the underlying issues.

The crucial point is that a socialism emerging out of an advanced capitalist country such as the United States will look quite different from socialism in an underdeveloped country or the Soviet Union. A nation with a history of liberal democracy (competing parties, regular elections, trade unions, mass literacy, and so on), a highly advanced economy, and a skilled labor force, has a very different set of hurdles on the path to socialism than a society emerging from a legacy of colonialism, underdevelopment, and dependency.¹³ Socialist goals for an advanced capitalist nation, in addition to rationally (though *not* necessarily centrally) planning the economy and eliminating the brutality of market relations, would be to *extend* these liberal freedoms. One can explain the reasons why democratic freedoms are less developed in existing socialist nations without apologizing for this lack, and pose it against the starvation, repression, and backwardness of the rest of the third world in contrast. It is an error, however, to attempt to explain away these problems and paradoxes. As impressive as the achievements of some third-world revolutions have been, it would be dishonest and irresponsible to defend the policies of all nations that call themselves socialist. A misty-eyed view of third-world national liberation movements

and of socialist nations helps to destroy the credibility of socialist ideas, as with the Communist Party's uncritical defense of the Soviet Union during its most brutal Stalinist period.

We do not want to give cold-warriors more ammunition. But the achievements of existing socialisms are real, and varied enough, to allow constructive criticism. Their accomplishments, as well as their serious shortcomings, can teach us many lessons about democracy, mass participation, bureaucratic planning, and the struggle against racism and sexism.

The second view, that the third world's gain will be our loss, has particular relevance today with Jerry Brown, Jimmy Carter, the Club of Rome, and the Trilateral Commission talking about "limits to growth," lowering expectations, and commodity shortages. Media coverage reinforces the view that relations between the advanced capitalist nations and the third world are increasingly a zero-sum game.¹⁴

Recent leftist work on this issue does little to dispel this "new realism." According to the writings of such authors as Frank, Baran, Amin, and Emmanuel, wealth is transferred from the poor peripheral countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America to the advanced countries of North America, Western Europe, and Japan to the detriment of the popular classes in the former countries but to the benefit of those in the latter.¹⁵ Why should hard-headed college students, whatever their humanistic sympathies, support third-world struggles that might, eventually, mean a "lower standard of living" for people in the advanced capitalist world?

Much recent scholarship (or the texts and readers cited earlier) accepts the view that the vast majority of Americans benefit from imperialism without asking a number of critical questions. What are the economic and social *costs* of maintaining the empire? Do the costs outweigh the benefits? How much of the burden falls on the poor, the working class, and the middle class?

There is reason to doubt the accuracy of the popular view.¹⁶ As the concentration and transnationalization of ownership develops, American workers find themselves pitted against workers in the third world, to the detriment of both. They share a common exploiter, although the uneven development of world capitalism distributes the burden of exploitation unequally.

While corporate propaganda incessantly argues that higher

corporate profits “trickle down” to create jobs, increase wages, and lower taxes, the current problems of stagflation suggest otherwise. The growth economy of “late capitalism” encourages dangerous synthetic, nuclear, and petroleum-based energy. It undermines nutrition and health by processing foods and putting dangerous chemicals in our food, in the air, and on the job. Fewer jobs are created by the “war economy” that arms repressive third-world governments and subsidizes the defense industry than if the same money were spent for health care, mass transit, education, or other social needs.

There is a growing body of popular analysis (Lappé and Collins's *Food First*, Commoner's *The Poverty of Power*, Barnett and Mueller's *Global Reach*, and films such as *Controlling Interest* and *Bottle Babies*) that explains how the transnational flow of capital victimizes Americans as well as the third world.¹⁷ These books and films permit us to link the struggle against corporate power in the United States to the struggles in the third world, not out of altruism, but out of an understanding of our own long-term interest in the quality of our lives.

An analysis of imperialism is central to an understanding of capitalism; the accomplishments of the liberation movements in the third world have often inspired us. However, one cannot build or inspire a socialist movement at home if our primary focus is on the third world.

People's History

BECAUSE OF THE WAY American history is taught in most schools, people view social change as the accomplishments of great leaders, as the inexorable march of “progress” through science and technology, or as a chain of great events (wars, depressions, elections) that mark historical turning points. In contrast, the social movements of the 1960s inspired a rediscovery of America's history of popular struggles: slave rebellions, Indian resistance, feminist movements, pacifist and anti-imperialist campaigns, union battles, and radical electoral struggles. Biographies of popular leaders; stories, plays, and songs by and about unsung rank-and-file activists; oral history projects; and films of mass strikes, sit-ins, and other acts of resistance (such as *Union Maids* and *Northern Lights*) help to overcome the collective

amnesia about American popular history. Most Americans know little of this legacy of struggle and courage, which provides a picture much different from the typical treatment in high school or college courses.

Even radicals often ignore one critical lesson of this history. There *has* been considerable progress and social reform in the past few generations. Life *is* much better for the majority of Americans today than it was thirty, fifty, or seventy-five years ago. Not—as many history books claim—because of some aspect of the American “character.” And not, as some radicals emphasize, because of the “trickle down” from American imperialism's profits. The struggles of American men and women to expand the terrain of freedom and to improve the quality of their lives helped bring about these improvements. Radical scholarship of the past decade has now buried what Rubinstein called America's “myth of peaceful progress.”¹⁸ Many political gains, such as the franchise for women and blacks, social security, the right of workers to unionize, the minimum wage, the graduated income tax, minimum standards for housing conditions and workplace safety, are now seen to have been won after long, hard struggles.

For students who consider the demands and agendas of present-day socialists “utopian,” it is a valuable lesson to recall that in 1900, the reforms noted above were also considered “utopian.” At the turn of the century, most people dismissed the suffragists, the unionists, the advocates of the progressive tax, as naïve, foolish, and idealistic. Our legacy of revolt should be used to call attention to the fragility of today's welfare state, and to place our demands in the context of the ongoing struggle that has faced each generation of radicals.

Any focus on people's history confronts two closely linked dilemmas. One pits voluntarism against determinism. The other is the temptation of romanticism.

Although popular resistance and reform has characterized each period of American history, it has not been randomly or evenly distributed. Structural conditions shape the probabilities and potentialities for revolt. For example, one could not have had a successful industrial union movement before the widespread development of mass production. The success of the Southern civil rights movement was made possible by the

population shifts of blacks toward Northern and Southern cities, as well as the autonomy of the black church and other institutions of the postwar period. The postwar baby boom and the expansion of higher education created the preconditions for the emergence of the student new left. Such conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, for social protest to occur. The willful decision to act is also involved. Who, for example, could have predicted Rosa Parks's decision to refuse to budge from that Montgomery bus? Sociological or historical formulas cannot adequately explain such decisions. They can only examine the constraints within which people live and the choices available.¹⁹

Much recent radical writing on America's history of protest largely ignores this dilemma, but there are important exceptions. The current debate surrounding Piven and Cloward's *Poor People's Movements* is a healthy attempt to unravel the complexities of the determinist-voluntarist issue.²⁰ The book analyzes the conditions that inhibit and facilitate progressive reform in four movements—in the unemployed workers' and industrial union movements of the 1930s, and the civil rights and welfare movements of the 1950s–1970s. There is considerable controversy regarding their conclusions that poor and working-class people can best make serious gains through mass insurgency rather than stable organization, but they have triggered an important discussion within the left nevertheless. Movement organizers and radical scholars alike must understand what is possible under specific circumstances.

Such an understanding does not imply a call to arms. Neither does it provide an excuse to wait for the right historical moment, or to continue theorizing, until the time is ripe. It does suggest that people who desire a better world have a responsibility to act. An evaluation of the historical and structural conditions helps determine tactics and strategy. It is possible to make mistakes, but such mistakes become valuable lessons.

The problem of romanticism is closely related. Many radical scholars seem to have overreacted to the fact that popular struggle has been ignored or distorted by mainstream treatments. In response, they are tempted to overemphasize working-class militancy and resistance, and to blame misguided leaders and bureaucratic unions for the failure of working-class protest. This is the trap, for example, of Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!*, an

account of mass insurgency.²¹ To suggest, as Brecher does, that union organization inherently inhibits militant and successful struggle is misleading. (It also reinforces the cynical message of such recent films as Sylvester Stallone's *FIST* and Paul Schrader's *Blue Collar*, that unionization inevitably leads to corruption, co-optation, and self-aggrandizement.) The truth is that the current condition of the American labor movement was not "inevitable." Strategic errors by progressive unionists at particular moments, the ideological power of American individualism and anti-unionism, and legal and violent repression used by the state to limit union success (injunctions, purges of radical leaders, right-to-work laws) have contributed to the relative weakness of the American labor movement.

Romanticization can also focus on the individual level. Students are often led to believe that history-makers somehow embody personal characteristics of bravery, courage, selflessness that only a handful possess. They find it difficult to put themselves in the role of a movement participant, because they are uncertain whether they have the necessary personality traits. One cannot deny the extraordinary qualities of Eugene Debs, Mother Jones, Martin Luther King, or Malcolm X. All movements need inspirational speakers, propagandists, and administrators who rise (or are lifted) above the masses. But we often forget that the cast of characters in popular struggles—the suffragists, the freedom riders, the draft-resisters, the sit-in participants, as well as those millions who, without notice, refused to cross a picket line, joined a boycott, or wrote a protest song—were ordinary people.

Students, when encouraged to do oral histories of their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces, often find a personal link between their own lives and movements of social protest. It is profoundly moving to witness this process of self-discovery, this link between biography and history.

In addition, popular biographies, autobiographies, and oral history projects (such as the Lynds' *Rank and File* and Cluster's *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee*); films such as *Babies and Banners*, *Harlan County*, and *The War at Home*; recordings and concerts by Pete Seeger, Hazel Dickens, and U. Utah Phillips; and performances by the San Francisco Mime Troupe and their counterparts, remind us of the daily culture of popular

movements and the circumstances under which ordinary people, people "just like ourselves," take collective action and make history. We learn to feel part of a continuity of struggle, and to understand that people do not always take it on the chin without fighting back.²²

Growing up during the cold war, most new leftists learned little about the history of popular protest. In the process of creating their own movement, they had only a bare thread of connection with those who had gone before. Part of their task, which they have done admirably, was (and is) to remember the past and make sure that the history, culture, and lessons of our own movements become part of that tradition.

Socialist Incubators

PERHAPS THE MOST difficult task for American socialists is recognizing the possibilities for change in this country. It is easy enough, in light of the size of the socialist task, to be despairing and cynical, but to do so overlooks the ways that crises and contradictions present opportunities.

Much of what we want in a socialist movement, and in a socialist society, already exists, even if in small, isolated, ambiguous, and distorted ways. This includes a variety of cooperatively and publicly owned institutions as well as diverse radical reform movements that foreshadow a more coherent socialist presence. These can be called "socialist incubators."

Socialists must overcome people's cynicism about the possibility of public and cooperative enterprise.

For most Americans, the idea of government ownership (if not simply associated with totalitarianism) evokes images of "the post office" or "the railroads"—operations that taxpayers consider wasteful, bureaucratic, and inefficient. As a result, many Americans who distrust "big business," distrust "big government" even more.

Rarely are these operations put in their larger political context. Government ownership in a capitalist political economy faces a number of dilemmas. Government tends to be left with the "leftovers," the enterprises and industries that the private corporations cannot run profitably, but which are required by any advanced society. Cities and counties run hospitals for the

poor, but pharmaceuticals and hospital supplies are left to the private sector. The government takes over the passenger lines after they have been run down by the private owners, but leaves the profitable freight rails to these same corporations. The government builds ugly public housing for the poor (administered locally by housing authorities controlled by bankers and real estate interests), but leaves luxury housing (and provides tax incentives) to the private sector.

Despite this experience, there *are* examples of effective state-run enterprises. Few people are aware, for example, of the relative merits of the nation's 1775 municipally owned utilities that operate more efficiently, and with more accountability (despite their lack of size) than the large private utilities. Nor are most people aware of North Dakota's state-owned bank, a legacy of prairie populism, that has been providing low-interest loans to farmers. Liquor in state-owned liquor stores, such as those in New Hampshire, is much cheaper than that in private shops elsewhere, even though the government is only involved at the tail end of the liquor production, distribution, and sales process.²³ Examples of effective public enterprise—such as Canada's national health insurance, England's nonprofit housing system, and Sweden's mass transit system—suggest that there is considerable room for maneuver even within the capitalist state. There is no reason why the American state can't do likewise, running basic necessities such as health care and pharmaceuticals, energy, housing, and other profitable institutions. The issue is not only one of public ownership, but also of democratic control.

Similarly, the notion of employee- or consumer-controlled firms raises the specter of having "too many chefs" making decisions or faces the strong belief that management decisions of complex organizations should be left to "experts" with "know-how," something that is presumably beyond the reach of the majority of employees.

There is, of course, a long and viable tradition of consumer- and producer-owned cooperatives in both the American and the European experience. Yet these activities are part of the hidden history that keeps the political imagination of most citizens within "acceptable" limits. For example, few students in my courses at the University of Oregon four years ago were even aware of

the sixteen worker-owned plywood mills that have existed for over a generation in the Northwest. Equally unknown is the variety of consumer and producer cooperatives that grew out of the agrarian revolt, brilliantly analyzed in Goodwyn's recent *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America*.²⁴

Probably the most publicized co-ops are the various "alternative" institutions that developed in the 1960s to provide a variety of services (medical care, housing, legal assistance, food, "underground" news, printing, and psychological counseling) in a more egalitarian, democratic setting. While many of these efforts were short-lived, others have survived through the current period, facing and overcoming crises, changing, and adapting.²⁵

Of more recent vintage are attempts by employees faced with plant shutdowns to rescue their jobs by buying and running the plants themselves. These activities are primarily a product of the flight of capital away from older, industrial metropolitan areas, often a decision by multinational corporations to shut down plants in areas with a unionized work force, union wages, and strict environmental regulations. The workers in these situations—such as the Vermont Asbestos Group, the Clinton Cooperative Press in Massachusetts, or the steelworkers at the Lykes plant in Youngstown—view worker ownership as a last-ditch effort to save their jobs, not as a stepping-stone to political change. In some exceptional cases, employees have been given some part of ownership or management of a company, such as the International Group Plans Insurance Company in Washington, D.C. In some cases, public funds for worker or community ownership have been provided to save a declining local economy. Similarly, some tenants' groups have made good use of "sweat equity" and community block grants to take over run-down or abandoned buildings and turn them into tenant-owned cooperatives, usually on a nonprofit basis. Recent creation of the National Consumer Cooperative Bank, a product of several years of lobbying by the cooperative and public-interest movements, will provide funds for such activities.²⁶

Cooperatives must compete in the same marketplace as much larger and more powerful institutions. In the case of the last-ditch takeovers, workers are buying a firm (or building) that has already been abandoned as a losing proposition by another, larger company (or landlord). In some cases the plant was profit-

able, but not profitable *enough* for multinational firms that can take their capital elsewhere, and the workers can continue operating it profitably. In other cases, workers face the same severe problems—old and deteriorating equipment, environmental regulations that require costly improvements, and competition from overseas—and find themselves in an economic cul-de-sac. Cooperatives, whether run as profit or nonprofit enterprises, have less access to credit and capital in order to expand and develop the economies of scale necessary for survival. Some states, such as Massachusetts, have set up state agencies to lend money to risky nonprofit enterprises, but the track record so far is too limited to assess. Cooperatives also have less access to raw materials because they are rarely vertically integrated. The cooperative plywood mills of the Northwest, for example, have to pay more for timber than Weyerhaeuser or Crown-Zellerbach, which own their own forests.²⁷

Those cooperative "alternative" institutions that are self-consciously political confront the dilemma of trying to do three, often incompatible, things simultaneously: provide a service at reasonable cost and quality; operate democratically with attention to internal process; and challenge the dominant institutions as part of a larger political movement. Efforts to do all three have been the downfall of many counterinstitutions. In any kind of cooperative institution, employees often lack the know-how, or the confidence, to manage enterprises. Few Americans have been socialized to take responsibility in that way. Smaller firms cannot risk making mistakes the way more stable corporations can. Workers in cooperatively owned firms have even handed over management to "professionals" who may or may not be accountable to the employees. Only a few studies have analyzed the conditions that facilitate success among worker or consumer cooperatives.²⁸

Finally, the existence of consumer or worker cooperatives, even on a wide scale, does not address the need for some mechanism to plan and coordinate different units of production. If workers or consumers become capitalists, they still operate in a marketplace, competing against other firms, with no overall coordinating mechanisms to determine what products and services are necessary.

NONE OF THESE examples is meant to imply a wholesale endorsement of cooperative and public ownership as presently constituted. There are severe problems and limitations to these activities within a capitalist society. The point is not to view these public and cooperative institutions as solutions to the overall structure of capitalism, but to provide concrete illustrations of noncapitalist institutions. It is particularly important to discuss these alternatives in the context of the larger political effort because some of the same ideas, labeled "state planning" or "job enrichment," are now on the agenda of the capitalist class as strategies to deal with shrinking productivity and resource allocation. For example, faced with problems such as absenteeism, alcoholism, high turnover rates, and other obstacles to productivity (outlined in the HEW report *Work in America*), large corporations are beginning to experiment with a variety of "job enrichment" plans.

Government subsidization of nonprofit and cooperative enterprises is often intended to manage the contradictions of capitalist production. Firms that have the "freedom" to shift their capital to lower-wage parts of the nation and the globe will "de-develop" industrial areas and threaten the legitimacy of the system. Similarly, the inability of the private sector to provide adequate health care or housing for the poor and many working-class families has led to a number of proposals to have the government actually run or simply subsidize these activities. A number of corporate policy groups have been pushing national health insurance, loans to tenants who take over abandoned buildings through "sweat equity," consumer-run health maintenance organizations (HMOs), and even a federally owned and run oil company to provide a "yardstick" against which to judge the activities of the private energy industry.

Socialists should neither reject all these efforts out of hand (they are potential openings to expand the realm of worker, consumer, and public control) nor defend them uncritically. While exposing the limits of these efforts, we should also recognize that capitalist attempts at reform usually come about when the costs to business of reproducing and housing its labor force get too high. These high costs are the result of previous struggles—which shifted the terrain for the next stage of battle.

Thus, evaluations of cooperative and public enterprise must

place it in the context of ongoing conflict as well as analyze the human and social benefits of socialist relationships of production. These "socialist incubators" can provide inspiration and direction only to the extent that there is a popular movement to turn such activities into political issues. Below the surface of news headlines, there is an enormous amount of political activity now directed at challenging the repression of human potential, the patterns of political and economic inequality, and the devastation of the environment. In the last several years, radical reform movements have been gaining momentum, evaluating strategies, and maneuvering for position. The news media pay slight attention to these activities because they are more complex and less dramatic than the violent, confrontation and generation-gap stories of the 1960s. But the politics of these contemporary movements are more mature, the constituencies broader, and the promise of long-term success greater than those of the 1960s.

The citizens' action movement—including such groups as Massachusetts Fair Share, ACORN, the Campaign for Economic Democracy, the Ohio Public Interest Campaign, the Illinois Public Action Council, the New Jersey Tenants Organization, and similar groups—has organized mass-based organizations among poor and working-class constituents who might otherwise be mobilized by the "new right" or be politically inactive. Their issues include tax reform, red-lining, solar energy development, plant shutdowns, rent control and "gentrification," utility rates, and public services. They have become effective at lobbying and mobilizing low- and moderate-income citizens to focus anger at corporate targets and their government allies. Although primarily organized at city and state levels, they have recently begun to form national networks such as National Peoples Action, Citizen Action, the National Association of Neighborhoods, and others.

The consumer and environmental movements—the Clamshell Alliance and its counterparts across the country, the network of Nader-inspired organizations (Public Citizen, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Tax Reform Research Group), the Brown Lung Association, and a number of local Committees for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH)—have challenged corporate policies on industrial pollution, workplace health

conditions, the quality and cost of the American diet, and the development of nuclear energy.

Stirrings within the labor movement provide evidence of a growing disillusionment with the "business unionism" of the postwar period. The labor movement suffered a major defeat two years ago when Congress voted against labor-law reform after intense business lobbying. This defeat, and the growing size and sophistication of union-busting firms, shook both union leaders and rank-and-file groups into a growing awareness of the seriousness of the corporate anti-labor offensive. Labor's role in the Progressive Alliance, Democratic Agenda, Citizen-Labor Energy Coalition, Big Business Day, and support for the Equal Rights Amendment indicates a slow but gradual awareness of the need to build bridges with other progressive movements. Rank-and-file union insurgencies or progressive new leaders in a number of unions (including the Steelworkers, Machinists, Teamsters, AFSCME, and others) are hopeful signs. High on labor's agenda are renewed efforts to pass labor-law reform and combat "right-to-work" laws; legislation restricting plant closings and corporate mergers; revision of tax laws that favor investment overseas and in non-union areas within the United States; and efforts to control union pension funds—a potential source of capital for new housing and other job-creating programs.

The women's movement has had major successes during the past decade. It has established shelters for battered women, organized women office workers in major cities in groups such as 9-to-5 and Women Employed, fought for abortion rights, and created numerous institutions to promote women's culture. Less programmatically, it has "raised consciousness" around a wide variety of concerns that have only slowly moved from the private sphere of recognition to the public sphere of movement-building. The failure to pass the Equal Rights Amendment indicates, however, that these efforts have not yet added up to effective national political power.

The peace movement, which spearheaded the opposition to the Vietnam War and created many radicals in the process, did not end when the war was over. The fight against militarism has continued, through the American Friends Service Committee, Mobilization for Survival, the broad Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, ad hoc groups to support liberation

struggles in Chile, Nicaragua, Angola, and elsewhere, and other organizations (particularly liberal churches) actively engaged in efforts to shift defense spending toward social programs, end arms sales to dictatorships, and challenge Carter's recent effort to reintroduce the draft. As the Iran and Afghanistan crises triggered a wave of jingoism and cold-war attitudes, these groups face considerable resistance. Yet they have also formed the foundation for growing anti-draft sentiment on the nation's campuses. Indeed, students, a group characterized by the media as quiet and passive during the 1970s, have not been involved only with opposition to the draft. They have been central to the anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid movement and a source of staff and volunteer support for a wide range of off-campus movements, particularly the citizen action organizations.

FINALLY, radicals have begun developing a more programmatic strategy toward the electoral process itself. Congressmen Ron Dellums (D-Cal.) and John Conyers (D-Mich.), city council members Ken Cockrel of Detroit, Ruth Messenger of New York City, David Sullivan of Cambridge, Ruth Yannata Goldway of Santa Monica (all explicit socialists), and many others, are winning elections and seeking to find ways to use the power of elected office to support the efforts of the groups mentioned above. Socialist groups such as the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the New American Movement occasionally play an important part in these electoral campaigns. The Citizens Party is worth watching, despite its initial weaknesses. Even out of unsuccessful campaigns, such as Tom Hayden's 1976 run for the U.S. Senate from California, new constituents are mobilized and radicals learn the mechanics of electoral politics that can be used for other issues (such as rent control and tax reform) and campaigns. Organizations and think tanks such as the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policy, the Institute for Policy Studies, and the National Center for Economic Alternatives have helped this process by creating a network of progressive public officials and devising workable legislation.

The value of these activities is greater than whatever short-term reforms they manage to achieve. They are training grounds for the development of grassroots leaders, for political education, for combatting the passive "you can't fight City Hall" atti-

tude prevalent among the vast majority of Americans. They are providing large numbers of people with the self-esteem, self-confidence, and opportunity to "make history" and thus to take some control over their lives in a concrete, strategic, and collective way. They are building a broad base today for a movement in the next several decades.

The preceding provides a broad outline of the kinds of work that have developed during the past decade and gives us some hope for the 1980s.²⁹ Socialists will differ over the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies and groups. It is obvious that as separate (often locally based) reform movements, they lack a common agenda and a common center that would turn into a coordinated, effective, mass movement. That is a task for the coming period. Yet taken together, these efforts do provide a point of reference for a socialist pedagogy in the present period.

Conclusion

TEACHERS HELP TO SHAPE the assumptions, values, and choices of their students, by what they say as well as by what they don't say. The existence of Marxist, socialist, and radical scholarship, now available in monographs, texts, anthologies, journals, and films, is an important antidote to mainstream analyses of society. But however receptive students may be, analyses that offer a radical critique of the current problems of capitalism will only reinforce their cynicism unless they are accompanied by analysis of the possibilities for transforming the situation into something better.

What I have called "third worldism," "people's history," and "socialist incubators," are ways teachers and scholars can attempt to confront the cynicism about human nature and political struggle that inhibits and frustrates so many socialists.

In the past two decades, many radicals have shifted from false hopes of "revolution now" to no hope at all. We must now learn, as teachers, scholars, and activists, to walk the tightrope between romanticism and cynicism. The lessons of our own radical scholarship are clear: building a popular mass movement requires a critique of the present, a vision of the future, and a strategy. Yet neither vision nor strategy is possible, on a mass basis, unless the

cynicism about social change that now pervades American politics and culture can be overcome.

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