

## LIBERAL PRACTICALITY AND THE US LEFT

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There is a large left constituency in the United States but it is mainly invisible, **lacking** any central organizational basis in the society as a whole. The partnership of the state and capital operates relatively smoothly in comparison to other advanced capitalist societies. Consequently, the dominant organs of power have been able, with considerable success even in times of crisis, to project a hegemonic 'consensus' from above that has left a majority of the population marginalized, effectively removing them from meaningful participation in the polity. The chief tenets of this hegemonic consensus are: (1) 'America' is an essentially classless society in which Emerson's 'infinite of the private man' is a **working** reality. (2) 'The genius of American politics' lies in its rejection of **all closed ideological** systems, hence the lack of fundamental controversy over **values**.<sup>1</sup> (3) The political sphere is an equilibrium of freely competing pluralist interests. (4) Conquest of the natural-technological frontier through the growth of private enterprise will allow for steady improvement in the human condition with no alteration in the already ideal social relationships. And (5) America is the leader of the Free World.

Given such a definition of 'America,' it is possible to contend without too much fear of exaggeration that Ralph Ellison's metaphor of the 'invisible man' applies not only to African-Americans, but also in certain respects to Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians, women, the poor, gays, radical environmentalists, socialists and almost the entire working class; while the term 'America' itself symbolizes US dominance over Latin America, and hence the subordination of the third **world**.<sup>2</sup>

In this hegemonic construction of reality, everything that does not fit the preferred self-image of possessive-individualist society is systematically excluded from view and all ideas outside a narrow – and, it would appear, still narrowing – spectrum are declared **unAmerican**. US left intellectuals, most of whom were products of the rise of the new left in the 1960s, have increasingly arrived at the conclusion that they have no alternative but to exploit the contradictions of the dominant liberal democratic ideology

from a position located inside that ideology, as a means for advancing the **interests** of the 'other Americas.' Such a strategy, however, invariably involves employing the form of thought and language that C. Wright Mills called 'liberal practicality,' the worst aspects of which are a refusal to view society as an organic whole, and a 'democratic theory of knowledge' in which 'all facts are created **equal**.'<sup>3</sup>

Concrete manifestations of this growing recourse to liberal practicality within the US left can be seen in such devices as: (a) the notion that the discourse of liberal democracy, if simply broadened and extended, provides the basis for a form of socialism; (b) the utilization of social **contract** metaphors outside of any realistic consideration of power relations; (c) the proliferation of timid blueprints for the rebuilding of America; (d) the insistence on attacking corporations rather than capitalism; (e) the reliance on nationalist thinking that downplays US capitalism's historic role as an imperial power; (f) the presentation of social struggle entirely in terms of a plurality of social movements; and (g) the calls to 'liberate theory' by decentering the concept of social class. Underlying all of this is the mistaken assumption that by constantly toning down its demands and adopting what Mills referred to as the 'vocabulary of motive' of liberalism the left will somehow be able to persuade the powers that be to compromise their own interests.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, these developments are not unique to US radicalism but are similar to recent reformist tendencies emerging within the European left during a period of widespread conservative ascendancy. It is therefore not surprising that the arguments of those US left thinkers who in the era of Reagan and Bush have most fervently embraced liberal practicality as a way of advancing radical ideas are not easily distinguishable from what Ralph **Miliband** has aptly termed 'the new revisionist spectrum' in Britain under **Thatcher**.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the contributions of US radicals must be viewed in a slightly different light from those of their European counterparts. The lack of any socialist or even social democratic organizational structures of any significance in the society, and the extraordinary weakness of the US trade union movement, means that it is perhaps inevitable that many dedicated radicals will be drawn within the circle of the liberal debate for no other reason than the seemingly pragmatic one that it appears to be the only game in town. Hence, it is much more difficult in a one-dimensional US than in a relatively two-dimensional European context to characterize a shift toward liberal discourse in and of itself as 'revisionist' or even 'reformist' in character. In making concessions (sometimes unknowingly) to the hegemonic ideology, therefore, many US radicals are doubtless simply trying to be practical and realistic, as these terms are overwhelmingly defined by vested interests within US society. Still, the thesis of this essay is that socialist intellectuals can fulfill their responsibility to the working class – the great mass of society – under these circumstances only to the extent that they speak the truth

and openly employ the socialist language of class, power and anti-capitalist struggle; thereby avoiding the political, moral and ideological pitfalls of timidly entreating capital on the basis of its own preferred discourse of liberal **practicality**.<sup>6</sup>

For the left to give way to liberal ways of defining reality in this particular historical juncture, moreover, would represent not only a failure of nerve and imagination, but also would constitute an unconscionable abandonment of popular forces in their hour of need. Thus while numerous left intellectuals have been engaged in making concessions to liberal forms of practicality, the actual class struggle in the United States has heated up, with economic restructuring and market fetishism constituting the basis of a continuing right wing assault, and the Rainbow Coalition (or Jackson phenomenon) representing perhaps the first signs of a nascent mass-based class struggle from below aimed at the state in more than half a century. At such an historic moment any attempt to embrace liberal **thinking** would be a retreat from the very possibility now offered of **breaking** out of the ideological straightjacket that dominates US politics.

### *I. C. Wright Mills and the Critique of Liberal Practicality*

In order to understand the full implications of the 'discursive strategy' now favoured by many leftists – which involves adopting liberal language and ways of interpreting reality in preference to traditional socialist discourse as a means of advancing radical ends – it is useful to begin with a detailed look at the critique of liberal practicality presented by C. Wright Mills at the height of the early Cold War defeat of the socialist left. Following the successful **McCarthyite** assault on the left in the first decade following the Second World War, socialist political and intellectual activity in the United States, which had been rekindled for a time during the Great Depression and New Deal, virtually disappeared from the social landscape – outside of the dogged resistance of a handful of independent radicals. These were the years that Daniel Bell glorified in terms of 'the end of ideology' and that Mills characterized as the time of the great 'American celebration.'

Significantly, it was during this period of conservative ascendancy, that Mills was to emerge as perhaps the single greatest critic of 'liberal values in the modern world' that the United States had produced since the time of Thorstein **Veblen**.<sup>7</sup> In this regard it is crucial to understand that, contrary to what some have supposed, Mills' well-known studies of class and power in such works as *The New Men of Power*, *White Collar* and *The Power Elite* do not sum up the extent of his intellectual achievement. Rather these studies carry their full impact only when seen in terms of his larger, lifelong critique of the liberal creed, in which he was primarily concerned with demonstrating the institutionalized powerlessness of individuals on the lower levels of the pyramid of power, and the various ideological means through which this fact remained concealed from a majority of participants in the class struggle.

At the core of Mills' thought therefore was a critique of the poverty of contemporary mainstream social science, traceable to both the shallowness of liberal discourse, and the cultural default of the intelligentsia. 'The ideals of liberalism,' Mills observed, 'have been divorced from any realities of modern social structure that might serve as the means of their realization. Everybody can easily agree on general ends; it is more difficult to agree on means and the relevance of various means to the ends articulated. The detachment of liberalism from the facts of a going society make it an excellent mask for those who do not, cannot, or will not do what would have to be done to realize its **ideals**.'<sup>8</sup> Despite its dominant place in the vocabulary of advanced capitalist society, the liberal creed, Mills argued, no longer represented a progressive vision – as it had in the heroic era of the rising middle classes. Instead, it had been reduced to little more than an empty rhetoric divorced from any meaningful theory of historical agency. 'If the moral vision of liberalism is still abstractly stimulating,' he wrote in *The Marxists*,

its sociological content is weak: its political means of action are unpromising, unconvincing, unimaginative. It has no history of man in society, no theory of man as the maker of history. It has no political program adequate to the moral ideals it professes. Twentieth-century liberals have stressed ideals much more than theory and agency. But that is not all: they have stressed going agencies and institutions in such ways as to transform *them* into the foremost ideals of liberalism. . . . [Liberalism] is much more useful as a defense of the *status quo* – in the rich minority of nations, and of these nations before the rest of the world – than as a creed for deliberate historical change. . . . To the world's range of enormous problems, liberalism responds with its verbal fetish of 'Freedom' plus a shifting series of opportunistic reactions.<sup>9</sup>

As early as 1939 Mills had noted that, 'Vocabularies socially canalize **thought**.'<sup>10</sup> Hence, it was the liberal vocabulary itself, through its inability to relate its ideals to a realm of social practice realistically conditioned by existing social structures, that could be blamed for much of the confusion of **cause** that characterized mainstream social science in general. The result was the growth of a form of thought that ironically was at its very best when dealing with isolated individuals, disconnected values and scattered **problems**.<sup>11</sup>

'So far as orienting theories of society and of history are concerned,' Mills wrote in his famous 'Letter to the New Left,' 'the [liberal] end of ideology [outlook] stands for, and presumably stands upon, a fetishism of empiricism. . . . **Thus** political bias masquerades as epistemological excellence, and there are no orienting **theories**.'<sup>12</sup>

Rather than a genuine theory of society or a conception of human agency one merely finds a celebration of blind drift. '[I]n the "organic" metaphysics of liberal practicality,' Mills observed in *The Sociological Imagination*, 'whatever tends to harmonious balance is likely to be stressed' and the dogma of 'principled pluralism' is replaced for the supposed dogma of 'principled **monism**.'<sup>13</sup> Underlying this emphasis on 'a pluralist confusion of causes' emanating from scattered milieux, moreover, is the

presumption that larger structural questions simply don't matter since society is governed by a balance of interests derived from the atomistic competition among individuals and groups, uniquely reinforced by the 'checks and balances' built into the US constitution. 'Not wishing to be disturbed over moral issues of the political economy,' Mills wrote with respect to the pluralist theory of liberal democracy, 'Americans cling to the idea that the government is a sort of automatic machine, regulated by the balancing of competing interests. This image of politics is simply a carry-over from the official image of the economy: in both, an equilibrium is achieved by the pulling and hauling of many interests, each restrained only by legalistic and amoral interpretations of what the traffic will bear.'<sup>14</sup> In short, 'the liberal "multiple factor" view,' Mills observed, 'does not lead to a conception of causation which would permit points of entry for broader types of action, especially political action.'<sup>15</sup>

This can be sharply contrasted to the more holistic approach inspired by Marx. 'To come to terms with **marxism**,' Mills wrote,

whether that of the young Marx or of yesterday's Moscow slogan, forces us to confront: (1) every public issue of the modern world; (2) every great problem of social studies; (3) every moral trouble encountered by men of sensibility today. Moreover, when we try to observe and to think within the **marxist** point of view, we are bound to see these issues, problems and troubles as inherently connected. We are forced to adopt an over-all view of the world, and of ourselves in relation to it.<sup>16</sup>

**Marx** thus represented the antithesis of liberal practicality as described by Mills. Indeed, the mood and style of contemporary liberal discourse – its concentration on the piecemeal problems of isolated milieux – could be seen as a more or **less** conscious abandonment of the challenge raised by Marx.

Intellectuals accept without scrutiny official definitions of world reality. Some of the best of them allow themselves to be trapped by the politics of anti-Stalinism, which has been a main passageway from the political thirties to the intellectual default of the apolitical **fifties**. They live and work in a numbing society without living and working in protest and in tension with its moral and cultural insensibilities. They use the liberal rhetoric to cover the conservative default. They do not make available the knowledge and sensibility required by publics, if publics are to hold responsible those who make decisions in 'the name of the nation.' They do not set forth reasons for human anger and give it suitable **targets**.<sup>17</sup>

This default of the intellectuals, Mills added, was frequently justified in terms of a kind of 'crack-pot realism.' 'Crack-pot,' in his sense, because of its narrow conception of reality and its mere acquiescence with the main drift of social events. Behind this form of practicality, in fact, lay a kind of opportunism.<sup>18</sup>

In sharp contrast to this, Mills quoted John Morley as saying, 'It is better to bear the burden of impracticableness, than to stifle conviction and pare away principle until it becomes hollowness and triviality.' Mills never

forgot **Hume's** dictum that one cannot, in principle, derive what ought to be from what **is**.<sup>19</sup> This warning of the danger of 'cultural default' in an environment ideologically conditioned by the crackpot realism of liberal practicality constituted the most important intellectual legacy of C. Wright Mills to the new left generation of intellectuals that was to follow.

## *II. The Growth of Tactical Liberalism*

Most of the radical intellectuals who were drawn into the left in the 1960s did so at a time when the main drift of society seemed to be in that direction. But when a conservative tide followed in the 1970s and '80s, many simply concluded that the best way to cope with the narrowing political and ideological climate in which they found themselves was to refuse to 'name the system,' in the hope that the ideological space could thereby be won to advance radical **ends**;<sup>20</sup> others eventually came to suggest that the best strategy was to replace a socialist orientation with a more up-to-date 'post-liberal' one. Once again left intellectuals, commonly refused 'to set forth reasons for human anger and give it suitable targets.'

### *The Idea of Postliberal Democracy*

One form of this emerging post-liberalism is evident in the fashionable view that the true meaning of liberal democracy can only be found in a form of radical democracy that would extend the democratic principle beyond the state to the family, army, factory and **office**, thereby breaking down the artificial walls that separate the public and private realms within capitalist social formations. This is seen as representing the essence of what was worthwhile in the socialist project, while remaining consistent with a radical reading of liberal democratic ideology itself. Scarcely original, this approach has nonetheless been dressed up in the 1980s in startling new clothes, discernible in the works of important left theorists like Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis.

Taking their cue from such writers as Gareth Stedman Jones, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Bowles and Gintis have thus sought to advance a new 'prefigurative discourse' of 'postliberal democracy' as an alternative to both liberal democracy and Marxism. On the subject of liberalism and Marxism they write: 'Whatever internal coherence these traditions possess derives more from their status as systems of communication than from their substantive propositions about how the world works or ought to work.' The liberal lexicon, Bowles and Gintis tell their readers, is strong with respect to its insistence on the need for democracy, freedom, liberty, personal rights and pluralism but weak in its failure to recognize issues of exploitation and community. In contrast, they assert,

the **Marxian** theoretical lexicon does not include such **terms** as **freedom**, personal rights, liberty, choice, or even democracy. . . . The **Marxian** commitment to democracy even where it is most heartfelt as in the writings of Rosa Luxemburg and Nicos Poulantzas, is thus without **firm** theoretical roots. **This** commitment can disappear as quickly as it has appeared in the **post-Stalin** era and nothing in **Marxian** discourse *per se* will remain to mourn its passing. Classical Marxism is theoretically **anti-democratic** in the same sense that any political philosophy that fails to conceptualize the threat of state authoritarianism, and the centrality of privacy and individual liberty to human emancipation, provides a haven for despots and fanatics.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, Bowles and Gintis go on to claim that Marxism: (1) 'accords no status to the private at all'; (2) treats state domination and patriarchy as 'unimportant or epiphenomenal'; (3) sees capitalism as fundamentally corrosive of patriarchy; (4) rejects a truly democratic ontology through recourse to a 'productivist' discourse inherent in the labour theory of value; (5) lacks the indispensable theory of individual action based on the **learner/chooser** distinction that liberal theory itself provides; (6) promotes a simple 'expressive theory of action' that sees individuals as mirrors of larger social structures; (7) has a simplistic notion of language that sees it as a mere 'conduit' for thought; (8) dismisses the discourse of rights as 'essentially yriativistic'; and (9) consists of a discourse that is neither hegemonic nor related to the way in which change is articulated by modern social **movements**.<sup>22</sup>

It is significant that none of these charges – all of which are obviously open to debate – are provided with any substantive backing in Bowles and Gintis' book. Nor do they examine Marxist theory as it has actually developed in an historical context of class struggle. Rather, all of the above charges are said to be derived from a straightforward analysis of the discursive structure of Marxist thought. Nowhere in a book that is largely devoted to supplanting Marxist theory as a critical outlook, do Bowles and Gintis make even the slightest attempt to analyze the concrete thought much less the words of any single Marxist theorist. Rather, they simply extract isolated quotations – without any concern for the original context. For example, Marx is quoted briefly in order to highlight his criticism of the French 'Rights of Man' in *On the Jewish Question* – with the implication that he simply rejected out of hand the bourgeois discourse of rights – without even the slightest examination of his overall argument, in which he pointed beyond political to human emancipation. Hence, Bowles and Gintis treat Marx as a theorist who saw the discourse of rights as 'inherently individualistic,' while ignoring the fact that in the very work cited he had critically transformed 'the philosophy of right' in ways that pointed to the necessity of the liberation of whole classes at the bottom of society. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis repeatedly claim in their book that Marxism is 'theoretically antidemocratic,' both in its discursive structure and because it does not include in its analysis a thorough critique of state despotism. No doubt, the argument is implicitly backed up by the extremely poor performance of post-revolutionary societies in this regard.

Such criticisms are not made explicit, however; and innumerable Marxist criticisms of the post-revolutionary societies, and the whole history of Marxist writings on democracy are simply ignored.

The enormous confusion that Bowles and Gintis generate by simply focusing on discursive practices, outside of any analysis of material struggles, can be seen in the fact that they actually go so far as to insist that, '[L]iberalism gives us the discourse of social change whereas Marxism gives us the theory of social change. Social change itself, however, is opaque to both liberalism which does not recognize that its discourse developed through class and other collective struggles and Marxism, which misconstrues what these struggles were for.'<sup>23</sup>

Doubtless, many people accustomed to historical materialist reasoning will find this statement bewildering. By what form of logic is it possible to contend that 'Marxism gives us the theory of social change,' while at the same time saying that it 'misconstrues what these struggles were for'? Can the theory of social change and the true motives for change be so easily separated? Doesn't this contradict the most elementary understanding of the relationship between theory and practice? Similarly, how could liberalism possibly fail to recognize that 'its discourse developed through **class** and other collective struggles,' while nonetheless knowing 'what these struggles were for'? Is it really possible to know the **cause(s)** of struggle without knowing who it is that is doing the struggling?

Still, questions of logic aside, the point that Bowles and Gintis are trying to make seems sufficiently clear. Namely, that the class struggles portrayed by Marxist theory were fought not for socialist ends, but for the ends, such as the extension of personal rights, envisioned by a liberal discourse, which was nonetheless innocent of theoretical or historical insight into class struggle. For Bowles and Gintis, then, the problem of social analysis seems to be one of incorporating the essentials of a Marxist theory of collective struggle into a predominantly liberal discourse – in order to create a new, prefigurative discourse of postliberal democracy. 'Our conviction,' the authors of *Democracy and Capitalism* write, 'is that elements of the now-dominant liberal discourse can be forged into powerful tools of democratic mobilization which, if successful, is almost certain in the long run to burst the bounds of the liberal discourse itself.' Thus, for example, these authors speak of the 'de-gendering potentials of liberal **discourse**.'<sup>24</sup>

Further, Bowles and Gintis straightforwardly admit that, 'Our choice of terms reflects a **recognition** of the hegemony of liberal democratic discourse as the virtually exclusive medium of political communication in the advanced capitalist nations and the profoundly contradictory, malleable, and potentially radical nature of this discourse.' Such discourse of course consist of words. 'Lacking an intrinsic connection to a set of ideas, words, like tools, may be borrowed. Indeed, like weapons in a revolutionary war, some of the most effective words are captured from the dominant

discourse.' Why then, they ask, should those dedicated to radical change insist on substituting 'unprecedented' words for 'familiar' ones? The liberal discourse of rights is the central lexicon of past and present and future social change. Consequently, the realization of the vision of postliberal democratic discourse 'requires no fundamental shift in social **dynamics**.'<sup>25</sup>

Bowles and Gintis repeatedly emphasize that this new postliberal discourse is not just another form of accommodation with capitalist **reality**.<sup>26</sup> The 'visionary-historical' changes that it identifies belong instead to that broad historical tradition of radical democracy represented not by socialism as such, but by the legacy of the levellers, *sans culottes*, Chartists, agrarian populists, feminists and the supporters of workers' **councils**.<sup>27</sup> Like all of these earlier popular calls to mutiny, postliberal democracy is free of Marxism's inherent weaknesses, for the simple reason that it derives its sole meaning from the democratic imperative to 'transport' the lexicon of personal rights as conceived by liberal theory to the realm of the market, where narrow property rights now **predominate**.<sup>28</sup> By organizing our understanding in this way, Bowles and Gintis tell us, it should be possible to create a fuller democracy in which both individuals and groups – in the language of game theory – 'have trumps to play.' Or as they go on to state in language that reverberates with a kind of Emersonian optimism: 'In contrast to traditional liberal doctrine, which supports a society of acquisition based on the exchange of property claims, postliberal democracy is a vision of a society based on learning governed by the exercise of personal rights. It presents a profound reorientation of our normative grid, an inversion of the relationship between human development and economic organization. This allows economic activity to be considered not as an end but as a means toward democratically determined human **development**.'<sup>29</sup>

The trouble with this outlook is that not only does it rest upon a profound obfuscation of the social problem, but it also represents an extreme case of the 'declassing of **language**.'<sup>30</sup> If we are to believe with Bowles and Gintis that discourse is the key to social struggle, then we are confronted with the fact that the prefigurative discourse that they have chosen in the name of radical pluralist democracy would be considered radical in no country in the advanced capitalist world except the United States. To speak simply in terms of extending the realm of personal rights to the realm of the market is to ignore the fact that the conceptions of personal and property rights within liberal theory are mutually reinforcing, and that at the heart of it all lies a system of class and state **power**.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, it is this question of the mutually reinforcing nature of class and state power that is most conspicuously absent from Bowles and Gintis' analysis. They treat the political sphere in advanced capitalism as a realm of freedom and right which merely needs to be extended to the private sphere and deny any central importance to the fact that liberal democracy is itself implicated in a system of class exploitation. Since liberal democracy

is the product of the struggles of all social movements, not just those of the bourgeoisie, it can therefore be turned against capitalism itself. In order to make this argument convincing, however, Bowles and Gintis try to elude other, more critical conceptions of liberalism, in which the class context stands out more clearly. This is most obvious in the criticisms that they level at C. B. Macpherson:

Where he [Macpherson] has treated liberalism as an ideology justifying capitalist exploitation, we see it as a contradictory discourse providing effective tools for radical anticapitalist movements. Further, unlike Macpherson, we emphasize the 'rights' components of Liberal discourse – derived from the partitions of social space and agency that characterize it – rather than its utilitarian aspect. Utilitarian reasoning is important only in liberal economic theory, we believe, and even there it cannot justify capitalist property relations. Finally, we do not share Macpherson's conviction that 'market principles' and scarcity itself bar the development of a 'fully democratic society.'<sup>32</sup>

In other words, Bowles and Gintis systematically downplay those aspects of liberalism having to do with (1) its role as an ideology justifying capitalism, (2) its character as a philosophy of possessive individualism, and (3) the limitations with respect to democracy inherent in its commitment to **market principles**. So **systematically** in fact do these theorists insulate their conception of liberalism from any association with 'possessive individualism' that they can hardly be said to be emphasizing – as they repeatedly claim – the 'contradictory' aspects of liberal discourse at all. A contradiction, after all, has two sides. Hence, a proper exploration of the contradictory nature of liberalism would force these theorists to analyze the ways in which liberalism itself reinforces capitalism; not simply the ways in which it can be used to promote freedom at capitalism's expense.

All their emphasis on the transportation of discourses to new sites notwithstanding, it is difficult in truth to see how postliberal democracy, as envisioned by Bowles and Gintis, differs greatly from some of the more progressive and developmental visions of liberal democracy itself. Certainly, it represents no advance on – and perhaps even a step back – from certain versions of liberal thinking, such as that of Hobhouse. The strategy that they seek to advance is not simply a disguised form of social democracy, since Bowles and Gintis are sharply critical of the social democratic emphasis on the role of the **state**.<sup>33</sup> Yet, it shares some of social democracy's weaknesses, being premised on a series of accommodations between capital and labour (beginning with the democratization of the workplace to make workers more productive) which will eventually lead on to the capitalist, like the feudal lord, becoming 'superannuated.' Their 'optimistic scenario of a no doubt tumultuous encroachment by economic democracy on the economic prerogatives and ideological hegemony of capital' avoids social democracy's statism, but shares all the evasions and illusions of social democratic **gradualism**.<sup>34</sup>

An exaggerated faith in the power of liberal rhetoric, coupled with a belief

in the autonomous character of such rhetoric vis-a-vis capitalist economic and class relations, has led Bowles and Gintis to the conclusion that a radical democratic movement can use liberal words to enhance the possibilities for meaningful social change. \*\* Such views seem to reflect a naive conception of discourse in which the language of liberalism is no longer **connected** to the hegemony of a particular class, but has somehow become – what liberalism has always claimed to be – the universal language of society.

One cannot deny that Marxist theory – which is certainly in a state of crisis – could use a great deal of 'revising' and updating to make it more applicable to contemporary situations. And in this sense it has something to learn from the kind of appeal to the individual in which liberalism **excels**.<sup>36</sup> Reality is, however, much more complex and contradictory than such an analysis would suggest. A particular discourse is, as Mills emphasized, a vocabulary of motive that must be *situated* within a definite context of social practice. Liberalism, as presently constituted, is more than simply a collection of words. It is a means of engendering motives and actions and represents a specific type of practicality – liberal practicality – tied to a definite power structure.

### *The Call for a New Social Contract*

A related if somewhat more modest, recourse to liberal practicality on the left is to be found in the reliance on the concept of 'social contract' as a means of justifying reform. With the transition from feudalism to capitalism 'the contract – to work, to sell, even to live in marriage – took pride of place.' \*\* Hence, the demand for a 'new social contract' between capital and labour – deploring capital's abandonment of the previous social contract as a result of the economic crisis of the 1970s and '80s – is a convenient way of pleading progressive causes. Martin **Carnoy**, Derek Shearer, and Russell Rumberger therefore open their book, *A New Social Contract*, with the words:

There is a crisis in America. To move **forward** we must have a new social arrangement between all of us living here – employees and employers, women and men, white and nonwhite, those with high and low incomes, young and old, working and retired. The eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau called this arrangement a 'social contract.' We never sign it, but we believe in it. When this belief degenerates, society does not work anymore. It becomes time for a new contract. \*\*

Yet, in contrast to the powerful way in which the social contract concept was employed by Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers to raise issues of sovereignty and class in a bourgeois revolutionary context, its current use obtains its meaning from the relatively shallow quasi-corporatist notion that by breaking its previous social contract with labour capital has engaged in class warfare alien to a properly functioning, mutually beneficial democratic order where such struggle has no place. As such it becomes a way of avoiding central questions of social agency and social power.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether it is particularly meaningful to speak of a social contract in this sense when describing US reality – which is obviously

quite different from the reality of a social formation like Sweden. The fact of the matter is that the harsh conditions that capital was able to impose on labour during the 1940s and '50s represented not so much a new 'post-war accord' as a crushing defeat for those wishing to defend the 'New Deal formula.' Summing up just one aspect of this counterattack during the early Cold ~~War~~ or **McCarthy** era, David Montgomery has noted that,

The **1947** amendments to the Wagner Act, which were known as the Taft-Hartley Act, **banned** sympathetic strikes, secondary boycotts, and mass picketing. They required elected union officers to sign affidavits that they were not members of the Communist Party, and they outlawed political contributions by unions. Perhaps most important of all, they authorized the president to seek injunctions ordering strikers to return to their jobs, and they made unions legally liable for damages if their members struck in violation of written contracts. In effect, the only union activity which remained legal under Taft-Hartley was that involved in direct bargaining between a certified 'bargaining agent' and the employers of the workers it represented. Both actions of class solidarity and rank-and-file activity outside of the contractual framework were placed beyond the pale of the law. . . . Since **1947** successive **court** rulings (especially those of the **1970s**) have progressively tightened the legal noose around those historic forms of working-class **struggle** which do not fit within the certified contractual **framework**.<sup>39</sup>

If there was a 'social contract' with organized labour in this period it was an exceedingly one-sided one – requiring the expulsion of the radical unions from **the CIO**, and finding its complement in the general **McCarthyite** attack on the left. Nor should it be forgotten that such a social truce – to the limited extent that it can be said to have existed – was connected to obvious failures of the trade union movement with respect to the organization of the South and Southwest, and to the differential treatment of peoples of colour and women. Viewed from this standpoint, the immediate post-Second World ~~War~~ period was characterized not so much by a new social compact between labour and capital as by the successful imposition from above of a divide and conquer strategy designed to break up the popular alliances that had constituted the material foundation of the New Deal in its later years.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses of the social contract argument, however, its appeal to progressives trying to construct a defensive strategy in the face of constant assaults from the right is considerable. Hence, even such good radical economists as Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone continue to root their analysis in an exaggerated notion of the 'post-war accord.' In fact, these theorists actually go so far as to deny what they oddly call 'the conventional wisdom'; namely, 'that business departed en masse from Roosevelt's [full employment] agenda when it discovered that the unique international position of the United States after 1945 offered seemingly limitless opportunities for profitable growth, without any sort of government planning.' Proof to the contrary – that capital stuck to its side of the 'social contract' – can be found, Harrison and Bluestone contend, in the passage of the Employment Act of 1946. However, this contention is difficult to reconcile with the undeniable fact that this Act was a dead letter even before it was passed. As Bertram Gross, who not

only drafted but helped to administer this piece of legislation has pointed out in his book *Friendly Fascism*, 'the idea of guaranteeing human rights was ruthlessly stricken from the bills finally enacted as the Employment Act of 1946 and the Full Employment Balanced Growth Act of 1978. In place of human rights to useful paid employment came a whole series of ceremonial rights in which the operational definition of full employment soon became "whatever level of official unemployment is politically tolerable." Over the years this level constantly rose. . . .'<sup>40</sup>

It is true of course that US workers benefited considerably from the prosperity that characterized the early years of US hegemony. And to that extent there was a partial cessation of hostilities. Yet, their institutionalized gains during this period were remarkably small. The US welfare state remained the most underdeveloped in the advanced capitalist world, and workers had little in the way of a safety net to fall back on when prosperity waned.

It is not just that an overemphasis on the so-called 'post-war accord' is bad history. To argue, as Harrison and Bluestone and other dedicated leftists have, that the 1980s represented a great-U-Turn away from a viable social-contract capitalism, which must be corrected through a second U-Turn and the creation of a new social contract, is to embrace a perspective that owes much of its power to persuade to its conformity to the theory of balance characteristic of liberal practicality. Thus Harrison and Bluestone place their greatest emphasis on the need to swing the pendulum 'back toward a better balance between unfettered free enterprise and democratic planning.' 'In reality,' as one critic of their work has correctly observed, 'labor will be able to articulate the anti-capitalist strategies needed to break with the dependence, degradation and inhumanity in which it is now entrapped only by acknowledging the irreconcilable nature of its conflict with capital.'<sup>41</sup>

A rejection of a class struggle perspective for one that emphasizes the writing of social contracts as the key to social change would make some sense only if one were to assume either that such contracts do not themselves reflect fundamental relationships of class and power in society, or are based on a kind of 'countervailing power' in which the various parties are constantly engaged in creating some sort of equilibrium. Otherwise such an emphasis only serves to veil the real power relationships in society. In this regard it may not be entirely out of line to recall that a wily French slave trader once named one of his slave ships *The Social Contract*.<sup>42</sup>

### *Blueprints for Better Management*

Under the influence of the industrial policy debate it has also become commonplace for radical political economists to advocate modest 'blueprints' for economic development and democratic change. Martin Carnoy, Derek Shearer, Samuel Bowles, David Gordon, Thomas Weisskopf, and Michael

**Harrington** are among the left intellectuals in the US to contribute such plans. One characteristic of these blueprints is that they consist of policies, modelled after the experience in Sweden and elsewhere, with which almost all progressives would agree as constituting desirable short-term goals. Yet, such policies are presented as their own object and are used to close the analysis (typically at the very end of a **book**), rather than as a means of opening up a discussion of the actual class revolt that would be necessary to achieve even these limited objectives.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the issue of class confrontation is usually avoided, and the proposals are mainly crafted in ways that suggest the possibility of creating a better capitalism – rather than attempting to transform the system. Yet, the hard truth, as **Miliband** and **Panitch** contend, is that 'those people on the Left who do want Swedish or Austrian-style social democracy, but who reject a confrontation with capital as too "extreme", are simply refusing to face reality. In the conditions of "late capitalism". . . radical reform inescapably entails such a **confrontation**.'<sup>44</sup>

What is at issue here is a strategy that points beyond simple reform or **accommodation**, and toward the concrete formulation of a radical reform strategy with a potential mass base in the here and now consistent with the goal of long-term societal transformation, or what Raymond Williams and others have called 'the long revolution.' For the left to involve itself in 'the presentation of more or less elaborate schemes for dealing with what are seen as our most pressing ills' while allowing its proposals to be entirely governed by the need of the profit system is to operate, as Harry **Magdoff** and Paul Sweezy argue, under a set of illusions borne of wish-fulfillment about the nature of power in advanced capitalist society, with damaging consequences for a 'long revolution' dedicated to nothing less than 'deconstituting the present structure of power.' Pointing to the example of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression, in which jobs were created to fit individuals 'where they were and as they were,' **Magdoff** and Sweezy argue that this embodied an anticapitalist logic, from which more general lessons can be drawn. According to this perspective the left should concentrate its effort on advocating those kinds of fundamental reforms that while meaningful in a present-day context, in the sense that they represent class defences for the oppressed, are nonetheless clearly anticapitalist in character, consistent with a strategy of long-term social transformation.<sup>45</sup> Such a strategy, moreover, demands a class struggle perspective rooted in the needs of those at the bottom of society – what **Marx** called 'the political economy of the working class' as opposed to 'the political economy of capital' – and not simply the drawing up of blueprints for better management designed to appeal to enlightened members of the dominant class with its 'bottom line' **accounting**.<sup>46</sup>

For example, the problem of the federal deficit can be approached on the revenue side from a socialist standpoint by advocating higher taxes on the wealthy. But instead of simply pushing for a resumption of effective taxation

of corporate incomes the left should raise the issue of a general tax on capital assets – even at the considerable risk of questioning the legitimacy of private property itself – backing this up with the kinds of arguments in relation to efficiency introduced by a theorist like Michal **Kalecki**.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile on the spending side, the class and imperial composition of state spending can be questioned – particularly where the military is concerned. Hence, the goal of the left should be wherever possible to promote a *different* logic from that which drives capital **itself**.<sup>48</sup> The hegemony of private property is not simply a given fact, but a process of struggle in which the boundaries are constantly being changed. And the **movement to** contain, repel and even defeat this logic represents a continuum of anticapitalist, socialist struggle.

### *Anticorporate vs. Anticapitalist Strategies*

An elaboration of this general approach has been provided by Prudence Posner Pace, who distinguishes the 'anticapitalist' strategy of thinkers like **Magdoff** and Sweezy from the 'anticorporate' strategy of certain radical theorists – Samuel Bowles, Thomas Weisskopf and David Gordon constituting, according to Pace, the 'outstanding spokespeople.' The anticapitalist strategy requires that 'the measure of a program should be whether (1) it is consistent with a theoretical framework in opposition to capitalist relations; (2) it is accompanied by an educational process which ties it to broader social questions; and (3) the process of struggle consciously attempts to separate the participants from the values and ideas of the capitalist class.'

In **contrast**, the anticorporate strategy is quite different since organizationally its goal is not one of forming a movement of people dedicated to opposing the unbridled hegemony of the capitalist class, but rather to 'modify corporate functioning so that it is less top-heavy and undemocratic, and thereby becomes productive enough to meet people's needs.' For anticorporate thinkers, Pace explains, the 'major emphasis is on the demonstrating how democratic reforms (in the workplace, investment, and in managerial decision-making) could restart the engine of capitalism.' Because their focus is on the corporation, and not the system itself, she points out,

those who put forth these kinds of proposals do not have to address the dual nature of the state. They are free to alternate **between** an 'anti-statist' community control stance and the demand, for example, that the federal government underwrite union organizations (because unions are good for productivity). Their main **concern** is whether their proposals are '**politically** persuasive and economically feasible,' and for this reason they do not address the problems of ideology and the education of people away from the dominant ideas and values of the society.'\*

So far has the US left departed from a clearly articulated anticapitalist strategy, in fact, that the very question of whether or not to 'name the system' – **i.e.** to adopt an outspokenly anticapitalist strategy – has been a persistent source of controversy among radicals. The main fear is that, as Hans Koning has observed, 'A word like "capitalism" contains secret enzymes which stop up the ears of most Americans listening or even drive them into

semantically induced hysteria.<sup>50</sup> Still, while one may struggle to invent a new language of class struggle, one cannot simply avoid the question of the system – say by attacking corporations rather than capitalism – without doing serious damage to the quality of the argument.

### *The Retreat from Internationalism*

Such an unwillingness to confront the system can also be found in the foreign policy debate as it affects US radicals. Given the US imperial role, it is perhaps not surprising that a loose anti-imperialist orientation has frequently constituted the common thread in the organization of the grass roots left. Nevertheless as the memory of the Vietnam War has receded and as the decline of US hegemony has come more to the fore it has become increasingly frequent for radical intellectuals in the US to construct arguments in terms that emphasize national competition irrespective of its effect on international solidarity. National industrial policy proposals are therefore advanced by progressives in the name of national competition, with barely a glance at the conditions in the third world. Nor are internationalist commitments as strong among US socialists as they once were. Despite continued popular resistance to US interventions in Central America, left publications in the US, with certain notable exceptions, have backed off from any serious discussion of imperialism as a *system* (the global face of monopoly capitalism), and have tended to treat it as a mere *policy* – or not at all. Serious theoretical studies of imperialism, as opposed to the mere development of the world economy, have become unfashionable even in Marxist circles.

Thus it is not surprising that considerable confusion is exhibited on issues like the third world debt crisis and the newly emerging competition of South Korea and Taiwan (to say nothing of Japan). Rather than lending support to Cuba's stance that Latin American nations – as victims of a long history of superexploitation imposed in large part from without – should band together in order to default on their loans (advice which the ruling classes in these countries are of course loath to follow) many radical political economists, with their eyes glued to the financial exposure of the largest US banks, have succumbed to the wish to be considered responsible in the terms in which this is understood by the powers that be, and have simply urged greater foreign assistance to these countries along with more favourable debt rescheduling to make it easier for them to repay their debts. One result of this is that radical political economists have offered solutions that have soon proven excessively moderate even when judged by the actions of conservative Latin American governments themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Worse still, many left thinkers in the US increasingly seem to be less concerned about imperialism than **about** waning US competition and a kind of imperialism-in-reverse. Robert Heilbroner, for instance, has raised the spectre of ' . . . a capitalist periphery combining high technology and low wages to extract surplus from a defenseless capitalist core. . . . Capitalism

would remain the dominant regime, but it would be the nascent capitalism of the newly industrializing countries, now generalized across the face of Asia, South America, and into strategic parts of Africa and the Near East.<sup>53</sup>

The significance of this argument, which Heilbroner apparently presents quite seriously, lies in the exaggerated fears that it portends for those looking out from the centre of the capitalist world system.

In this kind of deindustrialization and imperialism-in-reverse scenario that has become increasingly prominent within the left in the advanced capitalist world, neither imperialism nor the relative stagnation of capitalism in recent decades are central to the analysis. Instead, it is simply assumed that the dynamism of the 'technological gale of creative destruction' (to use Schumpeter's phrase), when **coupled** with the role of international capital, will undermine the traditional core-periphery relationship – so that formerly imperialist nations will have no choice but to abandon their traditional open door strategies, and limit the excesses of the international system. Not to do so, Heilbroner leads us to believe, would result in the fall of the capitalist core in a manner analogous to the Roman Empire.

Such an overemphasis on a 'defenceless' capitalist **core** imperilled by a rising periphery is quite irresponsible from a socialist standpoint, given the harsh reality of imperialism and dependency as currently experienced by the lower classes among third world populations. In this respect, it is worth keeping in mind that, to quote the latest World **Bank** development report: '[I]n Africa and Latin America hundreds of millions of people have seen economic decline and regression [in the 1980s] rather than growth and development. In some countries in Latin America real per capita GNP is less than it was a decade ago; in some African countries it is less than it was twenty years ago.'<sup>53</sup> Confronted with this dire situation, all references to the 'Latin Americanization of the US economy' through the agency of multinational corporations – while doubtless capturing a part of the truth – seem more than a bit out of **place**.<sup>54</sup>

### *Social Movements vs. Class*

All reversions to liberal practicality ultimately involve a retreat from class. Nowhere is this overall conservative drift in left thought borne out more clearly therefore than in current fashions in the analysis of social change, where it has become commonplace to replace the concept of social class with social movements. Thus Richard Flacks, in an argument that criticizes both the **Marxian** emphasis on class struggle and the Millsian notion of **the** power elite for failing to perceive the actual pluralist roots of US society, argues that this democratic pluralism reveals itself through the social movements that periodically challenge centralized power. These movements, he contends, 'are themselves the primary vehicles of democratic restructuring in America.' Moreover, Flacks **goes on** to add that, 'My argument **suggests** that in *the United States the movements themselves have played many of the political*

*functions that a labor party would have played had one been successfully formed.*<sup>55</sup>

In this view it is neither necessary to articulate the social struggle in class terms, nor to rely on the building of a labour party, since the social movements themselves provide the basis for democratic restructuring and a new electoral advance. Speaking of the need for unity among these diverse movements Hacks writes: *'The main political goal of social movements is to turn the national government into a vehicle for social democratization.'* Moreover, he argues that this can be accomplished by a 'new public philosophy' emanating from grassroots social movements, and constituting the core of a new Democratic **majority**.<sup>56</sup>

Drawing the reader's attention back to Robert Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy,' Hacks argues that the main fault of what he calls the US 'ideological left' has been its susceptibility to 'elitist' and 'vanguard politics,' which have led it to overlook the true importance of those very pluralistic social movements that have constituted the main agencies of radical social change in the US. Attempting to drive this point home Racks observes:

C. Wright Mills' depiction, in *The Power Elite*, of American society in the fifties failed to even glimpse the sixties and the scope and intensity of mass intervention in history that succeeded the mass apathy of the fifties. His elitist perspective helped clarify the structures of established power, but it tended to blind him with respect to the potentials for history making available for the powerless. Yet his style of thought and the content of his critique have tended to characterize the articulated understanding that most American leftists have of how society works.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast, Hacks would have us believe that US society is elitist at the top and pluralist (in its social movements) at the bottom. Moreover, any theory that overemphasizes the role of the power elite or the ruling class is partially responsible for blinding us to the spontaneity and democracy that characterizes social movements close to the level of everyday existence.

This argument – especially where Mills is concerned – is not particularly convincing. This is not only because the latter was so aware in his writings of the role of social movements in making 'available the knowledge and sensibility required by publics,' but also because there is no reason to think in 1990, over three decades after the publication of *The Power Elite*, that Mills fundamentally overestimated the **weight** of the control exercised from the top in US society. Thus the current left fashion of emphasizing the pluralism of US political culture could easily be criticized from a Millsian point of view as a reversion to the theory of balance characteristic of liberal **practicality** rather than an accurate description of contemporary reality.

In any case, Flacks' emphasis on social movements as the sole constituent element of struggle in the US, while clearly representing a progressive outlook, seems a step backward when compared to the shift toward a more unified class politics already discernible in the Rainbow Coalition or 'Jackson phenomenon.' It is important to remember, as Vicente Navarro has pointed out, that 'other countries with less powerful social movements [than the US]

but with solid class instruments (social democratic, socialist, and Communist parties) have better rights for minorities, women, and workers, and more protection for the environment than we do.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, the main lesson that grew out of the later phase of the civil rights movement, perhaps the single most heroic 'new social movement' to develop in the advanced capitalist world in the post-Second World War period, was **that** a poor peoples' movement that is to continue to advance must eventually evolve from a question of rights to a question of power – from political to human emancipation. And this requires a shift in the nature of the organized struggle toward class politics. **As** Martin Luther King indicated to his staff in 1967 '[W]e have been in a reform movement. . . . But after Selma and the voting rights bill [in 1965] we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution. I think we must see the great distinction here between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement.' By 1968, shortly before his assassination, he was publicly stating that, 'We are engaged in the class struggle.'<sup>59</sup>

In the women's movement too self-organization of working class women, disproportionately confined to household, service and part-time labour, may be the key **both** to reversing the rapid decline of US trade unionism and reviving socialist feminism. Thus, as Johanna **Brenner** has emphasized,

[T]he counterposition of feminism and **marxism**, of the feminist movement to the trade union movement, appears particularly absurd. Feminism as a mass reform **struggle** with radicalizing potential cannot be renewed on the basis of its old **middle-class** constituencies but depends on the rebuilding of **working-class** self-orientation. . . . Without the capacity, *in practice*, to take on the limits set by the demands of capital **accumulation** in a period of increasing international competition, **feminism** will continue to be vitiated of its radical potential, capitulating to the right, and unable to mobilize broad layers of women. . . . The fate of feminism as an actual **movement**, then, is tied to the fate of trade unionism and other forms of **collective resistance** to corporate **capital**.<sup>60</sup>

For all that can be said of the 'new social movements' in areas such as anti-racism, feminism, ecology, etc., the fact remains that their power to reshape society will be critically dependent on the extent to which they can connect their struggles to that of the 'old social movement' of organized labour – albeit in ways that will radically transform the latter. And when the problem is viewed in this way it becomes obvious that the greater part of the common ground and common strategy is to be found in the realm of class. Indeed, it is precisely this kind **of** unified labour based movement, particularly if activated by a socialist consciousness, which still remains the main spectre – the one that 'must above all be contained, repelled, and, if need be **crushed**' – from the standpoint of those chiefly concerned with maintaining the existing order; and it is at this antagonist that the class struggle from above is therefore to this day mainly directed.<sup>61</sup>

### Liberating Theory

Nevertheless, numerous radicals continue to oppose a framework that finds

the strategic common ground for the struggle of the oppressed in the reality of class. Perhaps the most debilitating concession to liberal practicality among US left intellectuals in recent years has **grown** out of the call to 'liberate theory,' closely associated with the work of such 'libertarian socialists' as Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel and Lydia **Sargent**.<sup>62</sup> As Albert puts it, 'Marxism opens our eyes about the ills of capitalism, but it also fosters continued sexism, aggravated homophobia, continued racial and ethnic strife, increased political authoritarianism, and a post-capitalist economy that subjugates "traditional workers" to "intellectual workers". . . And it does this at the level of **theory** and **practice**.'<sup>63</sup> Frequently attacking all Marxist thinkers for being 'economic monists' in their focus on class, Albert and his colleagues point to the need for a 'complementary holism' that, in the name of providing a theory suitable for activists engaged in diverse social movements, stresses the equal importance of four **interacting** 'spheres' of oppression: community, kinship, authority and economy.

This, however, is little more than a radicalized version of the fallacy that Mills referred to as 'the democratic theory of knowledge' in which 'all facts are created equal.' 'Is it not evident,' Mills asked, 'that "principled pluralism" may be as dogmatic as "principled **monism**"?'<sup>64</sup> Arguing in terms reminiscent of Mills in this respect, Michael **Parenti** has responded to Albert's criticisms of Marxism by pointing out that,

Instead of the primacy of class Albert offers 'four **defining** spheres': economics, community, **kinship** and authority, which permeate each other with equal effect. Regrettably, he gives us no evidence of having undertaken the kind of historical study that would invite us to embrace his fourfold model and discard the works of **Marx, Engels**, and all the later **Marxist** writers. Instead, we are left to wonder, why only these four 'spheres' and not others? Why renounce **Marxian** 'monism' for Albert's **quadrupalism**? If four causes are less reductionist and economic than one, might not ten be better than four? Why hold back with the diversity of our causalities? **At** one point he himself hints that there might be more than four basic forces in history when he says there are '(at least) four'. . . . Albert has dished up what **Engels** called the 'devil's brew of eclecticism,' a plurality of **equipotent** causalities that float ahistorically in social **space**.<sup>65</sup>

None of this, it should be emphasized, is meant in any way to suggest that Marxism is actually 'monist' in orientation or that it systematically excludes other forms of oppression – racial, ethnic, gender, national or cultural – in favour of a 'narrow' class theory, as writers like Albert erroneously contend. Rather as Manning **Marable** has put it, focusing on the interrelationship between race and class,

Racism, sexism and forms of social intolerance such as homophobia, are powerful forces within American society. Factors of culture and kinship are vitally important in providing the character and ideological composition of a social class or nationality. But within a capitalist social formation, the factors of material life and more specifically the struggles generated by the existence of the market and the exchange of labor for commodities prefigure all other social relations, including racial relations. In **other** words, the history of Black America cannot be explained satisfactorily by focusing solely on race or class factors. Yet it is class which has set the range of human options and possibilities, from the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade to the development of an urban reserve army of labor to repress wage levels

for all working people. C.L.R. James' **formulation** of the problem was as follows: 'The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it **fundamental**.'<sup>66</sup>

It is this central strategic role played by class in the historical construction of capitalist society – including the role that capitalist class rule has played in the formation of capitalism's doubly and triply oppressive racial and patriarchal configurations – which makes class the most important common ground for **all** movements emanating from fractions of the working class (the great majority of society) forced to confront the system in terms of power. What is needed at present, according to this conception, is not a democratic theory of knowledge but a rainbow understanding of the working class.

### **ZZ. The Historic Moment**

As we enter the **1990s** the political reality of the United States is beset with contradictions more severe than at any time since the 1930s. On the surface, the political climate of the country is shaped by the realignment that took place in the 1980s associated with the rise of the New Right party system, in which the Republican party – in continuous control of the executive branch since 1980 – is in a hegemonic ideological position vis-a-vis Democratic party interests. Beneath the **calm** surface suggested by these recent voting patterns, however, is a society tom by contradictions born of class struggle, in which there exists a potential for mass political rebellion that would threaten conservative political elites and tear the mask off the US ideological system for all to see.

Viewed solely from an internal political angle, there are two reasons for believing that the United States may possibly be on the brink of a new historic moment. First, the US has witnessed a fairly steady, long-term decline in voter participation, which in the 1988 presidential elections dropped to about 49% of all eligible voters. These losses in voting participation have been suffered disproportionately by the Democrats and represent to a large extent the underprivileged members of society. This 'party of non-voters,' as the leading theorist of political realignment, Walter Dean **Burnham**, has continually emphasized, is the natural constituency for social democratic politics; a constituency that an increasingly conservative Democratic party, although still representing the more enlightened wing of capital, has largely abandoned. The Republican political dominance of recent years has therefore rested to a considerable extent on the lack of enthusiasm that both the working and non-working poor have demonstrated for the moderate, centrist strategy of the Democrats, and thus on the declining voter participation of millions of marginalized individuals at the bottom of **society**.<sup>67</sup>

The single greatest political threat to the status quo was represented by 'the Jackson phenomenon' in the 1984 and 1988 election campaigns; itself

a response to years of crisis and economic assault on the subaltern strata of society coupled with the political default of the Democrats. Starting out from a solid base within the African-American community, and thus emerging out of the most self-conscious mass movement of the oppressed in the United States today, Jackson articulated a class politics new to the post-Second World War US. Not only did Rainbow Coalition politics threaten the divide and conquer strategy vis a vis the **working** class that the US capitalist class has so effectively wielded over the course of its history, but it continually broke through the ideological quarantine imposed on class politics and threatened to reintroduce millions of non-voters back into the political arena by addressing at least some of their genuine needs. Constituting both a force outside of the Democratic party and able to use the facilities of that quasi-public institution to advertise and advance its cause, the Jackson campaign threatened to alter fundamentally the nature of politics – making increasingly visible all of those who have politically disappeared within the society, and **making** the conservative default of the Democrats obvious for all to see. This represented the beginnings of a crucial unravelling of the internal Cold War political order; an order that requires for its coherence the imposition of an ideological straightjacket that leaves a majority of the population not only invisible, but effectively voiceless and optionless as well.

Whether or not the Rainbow Coalition itself will be the means by which this contradiction is played out in the future is of course less certain than that the contradiction will continue to haunt the established order in the US. Indeed, the unstable nature of the political alignment of forces, as the country enters the final decade of the twentieth century, becomes all the more evident when viewed against a background consisting of the dramatic decline of the Cold War political order from without, the waning of US hegemony and growing world economic instability. There is ample reason both on the domestic and international planes therefore to believe that a new decade of political and social instability may be in the offing.

What is the responsibility of the left under these circumstances? It is what it has always been: to advance a politics of truth; to avoid easy compromises; to address the immediate and long-term needs of the mass of the population and of those who suffer the most severe forms of oppression; to search for the common ground of that oppression; to resist ideological claims that 'we are all in the same boat' in this society; to reject what Mills called the 'crackpot realism' that makes the status quo into a kind of inescapable second nature and closes off the future; to fight market fetishism. In short, to avoid making what Raymond Williams called 'long-term adjustments to short-term **problems**.'<sup>68</sup> The only thing that has changed with the crisis of Cold War liberalism is that it has become more important than ever to resist liberal practicality, if new historic opportunities to advance a socialist practicality dedicated to the cause of undivided humanity are not to be lost

—and if we are to make our uncertain way forward once again. Indeed, only when the issue is addressed in terms of responsibility, rather than in terms of short-term victory or defeat, does it become possible to alter the balance of forces in favour of those whose need is best served by a long revolution. And it is this perhaps more than **anything** else that constitutes the essence of genuine socialist practicality in our time.

## NOTES

1. David **Marr**, *American Worlds Since Emerson* (**Amherst**: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 3; Daniel **Boorstin**, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).
2. Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1982).
3. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford, 1959), pp. 85–6.
4. C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People* (New York: Oxford, 1963), pp. 439–52.
5. Ralph Miliband, 'The New Revisionism in Britain,' *New Left Review*, 150, **March/April 1985**, pp. 5–26.
6. See Ellen **Meiksins** Wood, *The Retreat from Class* (London: Verso, 1986).
7. See C. Wright Mills, 'Introduction,' in **Thorstein** Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Mentor, 1953).
8. Mills, *Power, Politics and People*, p. 189.
9. C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 29.
10. Mills, *Power, Politics and People*, p. 434.
11. See Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, esp. pp. 85–86
12. Mills, *Power, Politics and People*, pp. 251–52.
13. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 86.
14. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford, 1957), p. 242; cf. C. B. **Macpherson**, *Democratic Theory* (New York: Oxford, 1973), pp. 78–80.
15. Mills, *Power, Politics and People*, p. 536.
16. Mills, *The Marxists*, pp. 30–31.
17. C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York: Simon and **Schuster**, 1958), pp. 126–27.
18. Mills, *The Causes of World War Three*, p. 87.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 94; Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 77.
20. This has been a **recurring** strategy of the US left most clearly articulated by the early leadership of the Students for a Democratic Society. See the chapter 'Name the System' in Todd **Gitlin**, *The Sixties* (New York: Bantam, 1987).
21. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp. 15, 19–20. See also Ernesto Laclau and **Chantal Mouffe**, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); **Gareth** Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
22. These nine points are to be found, respectively, in Bowles and **Gintis**, *Democracy and Capitalism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 23, 110–11, 229n, 18, 146, 160, 153 and 62.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 107.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 153, 185 and 179.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 178.
30. See the Marxist historian John Foster's brilliant refutation of similar arguments in the work of Gareth Stedman Jones: 'The **Declassing** of Language,' *New Left Review*, 150, March/April 1985, pp. 29-45.
31. Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-45.
32. Bowles and Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 233n.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-13.
35. On the autonomy of **discourse** see *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.
36. In this respect there is much to be learned from Sartre's *Search for a Method* (New York: Vintage, 1963).
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