

IS IT TIME FOR A NEW RADICAL PARTY?

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A MEDITATION ON LEFT POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

FROM THE NEW DEAL TO THE NEW LEFT

THE UNITED STATES is the only nation in the “advanced” capitalist world without a significant left party. Although labor and socialist/communist parties have long existed at the local level—many cities had workingmen’s parties; the Socialist Party made important electoral inroads at the turn of the 20th century; and the Communists were key organizers of the mass industrial union and other social movements in the 1930s and 1940s—in general Americans have been tied to the two-party system. The question is whether the absence of a left political formation of significant influence and constituency is a function of “American Exceptionalism”—as was first argued by the German sociologist, Werner Sombart whose book *Why is there No Socialism in the United States?* first appeared in 1906, when the Socialists were in a phase of rapid growth—or whether far more concrete, “subjective” influences have prevented the sustenance of a left party of national influence. Sombart’s essential argument is that in the absence of a feudal tradition class consciousness was never formed; in other words historical materialism applies only to Europe. America’s artisan and yeoman past, which constituted a sustaining myth of individualism; its surfeit of natural resources, which permit cheap energy and cheap food; its mobility opportunities, which parallel Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis; its populist urban political machines, which absorbed class discontent; and its ethnically diverse working class all constituted unbreachable obstacles to class solidarity. With two major exceptions—the Progressive Party presidential campaign of 1948, and the Green Party’s 2000 campaign in behalf of Ralph Nader—by the end of World War II progressives and many radicals had been swept up in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal Coalition or had conceded that radicalism was incapable of attracting a popular constituency.

We saw the consequences of the absence of a coherent and forceful Left in the 2004 presidential election, when most on the left and the center-left rallied behind a centrist Democratic candidate while the third party forces were hopelessly divided. Leaving aside the historical left abdication of the space of the opposition to the Democrats, the fact is the Democrats do not

occupy that space, except in electoral terms. Their campaign was bereft of sharply defined issues: they neither defended their social liberalism nor mounted an attack against the Bush administration's war and economic policies, which have been directed against the working class, and they barely mentioned the Bush betrayal of the environment or challenged his claim that the U.S. economy was on the mend.

The Left was led by the nose by the de facto American liberal party, which emerged as a serious political force during the primary season when former Vermont governor Howard Dean came out of nowhere to challenge the party establishment with his mild anti-Iraq War position and a grass-roots fund-raising campaign that helped energize a citizens' movement at the local level. The demise of Dean's presidential candidacy was not nearly as important as his legacy: the creation of a new middle class liberal movement that has taken the novel form of Internet communication both through a series of webzines (to add to the hard copy journals of opinion such as *The Nation* and *The Progressive*) and through issues organizing by MoveOn.org, which has shown phenomenal ability to assemble a mass on-line constituency that can be mobilized to write letters, visit legislators, and give money to promising electoral campaigns. But in the end they supported the centrist John Kerry, whose major domestic plank was to offer tax breaks for employers who created jobs for the unemployed and who criticized Bush for not sending enough troops to get the job done in Iraq.

In order to explain this state of affairs, we must briefly address the historical choices that led large sections of the Left to abdicate the position of opposition. For the sad situations of the last two decades that produced liberal hegemony over what was once a promising radical movement were the outcome of a long process that can be traced to two signal events that shaped the American Left: the admission by Nikita Khrushchev that the "crimes" of Stalin against the peasantry, a large cohort of old Bolsheviks, and countless others marked the twenty five years of his undisputed rule; and the Left's response to the rise of fascism during the 1930s and 1940s, when most of its organizations suspended the class struggle, chose to give qualified support to liberal capitalism, and consequently subordinated itself to the Democratic party. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the question of political organization was relegated to the back burner.

Since the 1960s, United States Left has, with few exceptions, accepted the view that the question of political organization was resolved by the collapse of communism initiated quite unintentionally by Khrushchev's revelations

at the 1956 20th Soviet Party Congress of the repressive and sometimes terroristic character of Stalin's rule. Among its features was the moral and political corruption of the Bolshevik project, especially the vision of a society in which workers, peasants, and other exploited strata would, through popularly elected councils, manage all of the crucial economic and social functions. Particularly loathsome were the details surrounding the Moscow Trials of 1936-1937, where the cream of the old Bolshevik revolutionaries were wiped out by a "legal" process that offered little room for defense, let alone dissent. Equally abhorrent was the knowledge of the formation of a new class of party apparatchiks and state bureaucrats who enjoyed a monopoly of power and material privilege. Far from a force for pointing the way to a more egalitarian future, the Communist Party became, itself, a new ruling class. These revelations drove thousands of dedicated Communists from the American party after 1956, which, after a prolonged debate, remained staunchly apologetic for the Soviet oligarchy; more, the stain carried over to succeeding generations of young leftists for whom the concept of "party" was itself an epithet. Even as private property in the ownership of the means of material production was largely abolished, state "socialism" brought neither freedom nor prosperity to the mass of Soviet citizens. But the immense authority of the Soviet Union on the Left—especially during the 1930s when its economic achievements were heralded as proof of the superiority of socialism over capitalism and the 1940s, when the Red Army vanquished the mighty Nazi war machine at Stalingrad—became a nightmare for millions of dedicated radicals and revolutionaries whose faith was shattered by the truths they had vehemently denied, or for which they had offered apologies for decades. The aftermath was not only mass resignations from many of the parties of the West, including the United States and the UK, but a slow but steady deterioration in the entire socialist project.

The end of "really existing" socialism triggered a tidal wave of criticism, confusion and recriminations that resulted in the stunning decline of once powerful mass Communist parties of Italy and France. The crumbling Soviet Empire prompted the Italian party to change its name to the Democratic Party of the Left, which preserved some of its electoral appeal but signaled a radical loss of confidence in its own heritage and vision. Soon after the name change, a new formation arose, the Rifondazione group that sought to retain the revolutionary aims of the historical Italian Communist Party. After 1991, the less flexible French party rapidly lost most of its electoral constituency and some of its trade union hegemony and, equally important, ceased to be a magnet for a considerable fraction of the intellectuals whose cultural and ideological role in French society remains to this day

important. What saved these parties from virtual extinction was their long-held ironic attitude towards the Soviet Union and its supplicants.

This was not the case with the American party and its once-substantial periphery. Although it had sustained losses during the bleak first half of the 1950s, especially among its leading trade unionists (who were prohibited by law from holding union office if they were open Communists), Khrushchev's speech proved utterly devastating to its member rolls and to the remnants of its influence. The key reason was the fact that since the party's inception in 1919, the American Communists were true believers. Particularly damaging to its survival, even in a weakened state, was the slavish subordination of much of the leadership to the Soviet party which itself can be explained by, on the one hand, the strong representation of fiercely pro-Soviet immigrant and first generation Eastern Europeans within the party, and on the other by the almost complete lack of cultural and political circumspection within its ranks. The latter feature is a symptom of the degree to which American Communism was truly American: puritanical, humorless—for example it lacked the capacity for self-mockery—and self-abnegating when it comes to matters of religion and other forms of authority. For the party core, which was mostly bereft of theoretical and historical perspective, Marxism and Communism were the twin pillars of their religion. Their fervent profession of Marxism scarcely hid the bald fact that few Communists enjoyed even a superficial mastery of Marx's critique of political economy, let alone the materialist conception of history. Instead, many party faithful were imbued with Stalinist dogmatism culled from a few texts. And Stalin himself was elevated by the official line to the status of a demigod, which made it all the more difficult to change the party's course, especially when the authority of the Soviet party was being severely tested and its leading figures had no time for the troubled Americans. After several years of debate, two thirds of its membership left the party and its influence was reduced to a whisper.

Other parties of the Left were similarly enfeebled. The two main Trotskyist formations—the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Independent Socialist League (ISL)—had suffered government attacks but mainly lost ground for two distinct reasons: the CP, whose relative strength once gave them a reason for being and sustained their opposition, was in shambles; and, like other socialists, many of its activists, especially of the ISL, became trade union and liberal functionaries, positions which drove them to silence, or worse, collaboration with the prevailing cold-war, liberal consensus. Others were pleased to find academic jobs, positions that had been

either denied them by McCarthy-like university policies or by party discipline. Although the SWP experienced a brief revival during the anti-Vietnam War movement, managing to attract some young intellectuals and soldiers, it was unable to overcome the general decline of the Left or its own lack of any but tactical imagination.

Questions of political organization typically occupy social movements and political formations during periods of popular upsurge. The New Left which, in 1960, arose in the ideological vacuum produced by its ancestors—many were “red diaper” babies imbued with their parents’ will to change the world but not necessarily sympathetic to their way—were, in the zenith of their influence, obsessed with the question of what to do in the wake of the spread of the movement beyond the universities, to professions such as medicine, social work, and teaching and even into the ranks of young workers and members of the armed forces. Their decision not to form a new “party” of the left, or even to build a national movement for a “democratic society” parallel to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)—arguably the leading formation of the New Left—was fateful for the future development of American radicalism for it was the first time since the 1930s that the Left had a popular base. Wini Breines has demonstrated that attempts to build a permanent organization failed was not the result of a mood drift but the outcome of a quite deliberate decision. The main voices of the New Left, including the leadership of the mass anti-Vietnam War movement, were convinced that party formations would inhibit the mass character of the movement, lead to bureaucratization and worse, to the inevitable integration of the movement into the liberal mainstream. These views were fueled by the prevailing libertarian sentiment among many sections of the movement which disdained ideas such as party discipline and centralization, but also were conditioned by the tawdry history of international communism. Since the Cold War was the ineluctable context for politics, the words of C. Wright Mills rang in the ears of many. In his influential *Letter to the New Left*, Mills left little room for doubt: do not become entangled in the “Russian Question” but build a movement directed to American society and particularly its politics and culture.¹

And these arguments were tinged by more than a small dose of participatory democratic concepts, according to which power must reside in the “people”

¹ C. Wright Mills, “The New Left” in *Power, Politics, and People*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963); Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1982).

rather than in tightly organized party elites composed chiefly of middle-class intellectuals. In SDS, “participatory democracy” stood in not only for a healthy affirmation of a politics that required the direct participation of the people “in the decisions that affect(ed) their lives,” but also for a populist, even anarchist suspicion of a political center that might have influence over the movement. These ideas were mixed in with a heavy dose of anti-intellectualism that permeated the later SDS.²

Of course, not every fraction of the Left was imbued with antipathy towards the concept of a revolutionary or radical party. For a brief moment the organizational question dominated conversations in the New Left and its leading organization, SDS. The debate was fomented by one of the sects, Progressive Labor (PL), a self-proclaimed Maoist organization founded in 1960 by a small group which had split from the Communist Party, accusing it of “revisionism,” a term that connoted deviation from revolutionary politics. In its search for a wider political base, since 1966 PL had made SDS a special concentration. While most SDS leaders rejected PL itself as an organizational alternative to the relatively loose SDS structure, many were attracted to its argument that without a party to lead and unify the opposition to capitalism and imperialism, the movement would inevitably ebb and perhaps disappear.

Why was PL able to refocus the organization’s attention away from its preoccupation with the Vietnam War towards a season of introspection? One factor was the enormous prestige of North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, its South Vietnam affiliate. Several leading New Left figures, including SDS founder Tom Hayden and Staughton Lynd, had visited Vietnam and returned with glowing reports about the anti-imperialist resistance and were impressed by its Communist leadership. The main debate within SDS in 1968 and 1969 was whether the organization should transform itself into a vanguard Marxist-Leninist party, or a revolutionary party directed to youth and blacks, or a “movement for a democratic society” which could carry the program of participatory democracy into the unions, community organizing, and the professions but which would maintain a decentralized structure. For anyone who would listen, Murray Bookchin’s passionate pamphlet, *Listen Marxist!*, written in the heat of the controversy, provided readers with a grim reminder of the legacy of the Marxist-Leninist

² The irony of the populist anti-intellectualism of the New Left is that many of its protagonists were themselves trained intellectuals. Anti-intellectualism outlived its initial populist moment; it pervades the so-called “activist” Left to this day.

left, not only in the United States but in Spain and Russia itself. Bookchin suggested that the anarchist organizational form, the federation of independent groups which retained their autonomy, was most appropriate to a political formation that respected the tenets of participatory democracy. Bookchin reflected the viewpoint of a number of the relevant discussants but in the cauldron of ideological fire was largely ignored.

The breakup of SDS in 1970 was both a symptom of, and a tremendous force in, the collapse of the New Left. Excepting feminist and ecology movements which had yet to peak, other movements were clearly in trouble. Massive demonstrations against the war may have forced a president from office, but the new administration of Richard Nixon had responded to certain defeat on the battlefield by widening the war. The killings of antiwar student protesters at Kent State in 1970 were a severe warning that the Nixon administration was in no mood for tolerance, even of whites. When Nixon, in the wake of massive resistance by draftees and objectors, abolished the draft, the protests were visibly weakened. And the black freedom movement, whose civil rights wing was already co-opted by the legalistic hopes surrounding the Voting and Civil Rights Acts, was further disarmed when, after Martin Luther King's assassination, it failed to address the long festering deterioration of black living standards due to the effects of de-industrialization of most major northern cities, the already evident abject failure of *Brown vs. Board of Education* to remedy de facto discrimination in schools, and the obdurate refusal of organized labor to address its own racism. In the nadir of the mass street expressions of the movements after 1973, various formations scrambled to preserve what they had already achieved and, fearing that efforts to build a coherent ideological and political left would anger their potential allies at a moment of advancing conservatism, tended to build coalitions with elements of the Democratic party. Thus, after a nanosecond's flirtation with third party electoral politics and something more than a flirtation with Leninist vanguardism, since the 1980s the main tendency of the Left has been to revert to single-issue politics represented, for example, by the current anti-Iraq War coalitions, by local level struggles such as fights against urban redevelopment, or by social movements such as the black freedom movement and feminism, which are on the defensive in the wake of right-wing assaults on their achievements of the 1955-1975 period.

It may be superfluous to remark that mass demonstrations against what has become an unpopular Iraq War, the impatience of large sections of Americans with the Bush administration's drift toward barbarism, the looming economic crisis, including gas inflation, the Bush administration's

palpable incompetence and class/race bias during the Hurricane Katrina debacle, the impending bursting of the housing bubble that has made even the most blinky-eyed neo-liberals nervous, and the absolute paralysis of the center-right Democratic party, which seems unable to remember what political opposition is, have yet to inspire the Left to seek a voice that may spur a new wave of opposition that would clearly articulate a series of alternatives and begin a discussion of what a new society might look like. With social movements at or near a standstill, and organized labor in decline and seriously divided, the problem of building a new Left and particularly its organizational aspects may appear merely an academic, even utopian, exercise. On the contrary, I want to suggest that these questions take on urgency today precisely because the so-called “objective conditions” are ripe. If they have a utopian dimension, it is no more accidental than any proposal for fundamental structural change in the present political environment, when most radicals find themselves constrained to fight for something less than increments.

By objective conditions, I do not mean to repeat the mechanistic formulae of the old Left: economic crisis, war, and a certain degree of disarray among sections of the ruling class. Among these conditions are what in the traditional rhetoric one might term “subjective”—that is, the effects of the interventions of specific groups and individuals: the considerable evidence of popular disaffection from the war and renewed activity, exemplified by Cindi Sheehan’s dramatic and media-savvy summer 2005 encampment at Bush’s ranch and the astonishing outpouring of support, despite Times columnist Frank Rich’s rue that “slick left-wing operatives” had succeeded in making her protest into a “circus”; the open, unprecedented acknowledgment among labor leaders and their intellectual acolytes that the unions are in crisis, even if their solutions are largely administrative; growing recognition in wide circles of the black freedom movement that the legal framework of civil rights established since Brown and the Voting Rights legislation do not equality or even freedom make. In fact, in the aftermath of Katrina some agree with New York Congress member Charles Rangel that federal neglect was a reminder that some conditions have changed little in the past forty years. And, miracles of miracles, some journalists have discovered that class plays an important role in American politics and culture.

RADICAL STEPS AND MISSTEPS

For almost a century, Sombart’s theory of American Exceptionalism, combined with its implication of the “end of ideology” (“end” because America

is simply not a class society on the European model) has remained a major argument for ex-radicals who have, in different generations, joined the liberal party cum New Deal Democrats or have moved further to the right. Writers such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Daniel Bell, and Seymour Martin Lipset have barely embellished Sombart's theory in their claim that the highest progressive aspiration is incremental reform within a virtually permanent capitalist system whose framework of liberal-democratic political institutions is perfectly adequate to address the remaining, albeit residual, cultural and social problems. Thus, according to this view, traditional European forms—labor and socialist parties and radical, let alone revolutionary, ideology—did not form because they were unnecessary. Underlying this perspective is the tacit assumption that the system is sound and increasingly egalitarian, at least open to mass social pressure or sufficiently democratic to accommodate and respond to dissent. Many leftists—people who call themselves socialists, anarchists, communists—function, in practical terms, as part of the liberal party. Irving Howe goes so far as to refuse the idea that capitalism is wracked by structural contradictions; thus democratic socialism, according to Howe, is an ethical ideal whose possibility of realization is dim but which provides a “margin of hope” for some important changes. Howe never went the way of his contemporaries Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol in embracing the main lines of neo-conservatism, but these arguments are more than justifications for individuals to move to the center or to the right.³

I want to suggest that American Exceptionalism is a powerful ideology that has become integral to the American political landscape and has influenced the Left to confine their activity to incremental remedies for what otherwise would be recognized as systemic contradictions. Its material basis at the level of subjectivity is the pervasive perception of the Democratic Party as the party of working people, which emerged when it adopted populism during the campaigns of William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson and which was echoed in the shift within the labor movement, first made by AFL president Samuel Gompers when the Federation supported Bryan in 1908 and Wilson in 1912. The decisive break came during the New Deal when socialists and some communists alike enthusiastically embraced the Roosevelt coalition, even before the social welfare state policies of the “second New Deal” in 1936. That the labor movement and major radical detachments were “integrated” into an explicit acceptance of the capitalist

³ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960); Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1982).

system and of the Democratic Party was not inevitable. It was conditioned by the ideology of exceptionalism according to which class consciousness was permanently thwarted by the opportunity structure of American capitalism; the American Left's response to the rise of fascism and its belief that Roosevelt and a progressive wing of capital would join a grand alliance to oppose Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco; the real, albeit temporary, benefits workers, farmers, and others made destitute by depression would derive from Roosevelt's social welfare programs; and a profound misunderstanding of the contradictory nature of the Labor Relations Act, which the Left was loathe to criticize, let alone oppose. To be sure, unions gained in membership and collective bargaining power during the first decades after the passage of the labor relations law. While the Wagner Act marked an historic shift from government hostility to labor's right to organize and make demands on employers to open support of the "right of workers to form unions of their own choosing," Labor has since submitted itself to a regime of regulation which, during decades of court rulings and legislative action on behalf of capital, effectively repealed the Act.

The New Deal proved to be an episode in an otherwise unbroken two centuries of race and class oppression, but it retains huge force as a sustaining myth of the liberal party. In any case, Labor and the main forces of the Left remain, against all historical evidence, firmly tied to a Democratic party that has long abandoned them; even the slogans that animated the party until Kennedy's enunciation of a "New Frontier" or Johnson's "Great Society" have disappeared. Still, at the political level, most of the Left (Labor, organizers of social movements, the intelligentsia) reject the idea of forming a new electoral vehicle, let alone a radical, ideologically alternative political organization.

This was not always the case. Between 1900 and 1917, the Socialist Party had over 100,000 members. By 1912, when Eugene Debs received 6% of the popular vote, its electoral constituency reached nearly a million, and it exceeded that number in the 1920 election. In its heyday and thereafter the Socialist Party was opposed to supporting candidates of the two capitalist parties. It elected thousands of local officials, including mayors and council members, state legislators, and two United States Congress members who were expelled in 1917 for opposing America's entry into the war. The party was nearly fatally wounded when two thirds of its membership bolted to heed Lenin's call to form a Communist Party linked to the international revolutionary movement. The Communist Party's membership grew to about 100,000 during World War II, but more to the point, Communists and other

socialists led unions with more than a third of the CIO membership and many locals of the AFL.⁴

The CP was influential in many sectors of American society, both at the national and local levels. In New York, the communist-influenced Teachers Union became a major ideological force in public education. Its activists were among the main organizers of a mass tenants movement and were key participants in the growing black freedom movement. The party's intervention in cinema, music, and literature later became one of the hallmarks of the McCarthyite counter-offensive, in part because it was immensely influential. Novelists Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell, playwrights Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw, composers Aaron Copeland and Wallingford Reigger, painters Max Weber and the Soyer Brothers, were only the most prominent of a legion of artists who were instrumental on the cultural front.

While the CP's electoral strength was negligible except in New York and California, many of its members ran as Democrats or American Labor Party candidates and won public office. This aspect of the CP's strategy was extremely dubious. In fact, in contrast to socialists and anarchists, who, for the most part, wore their politics on their sleeves, the CP undercut its influence by its Popular Front policies, one feature of which was to send cadres into movements and parties without revealing their affiliations or even their fundamental views.⁵

From 1900 to about 1970 there was a visible Left press. In the first decades of the 20th century, the SP had several daily newspapers in cities where they had substantial membership, especially in the Northeast and Midwest; the *Appeal to Reason*, for example, an independent nationwide socialist weekly with 700,000 in sales and several million readers, came out of Girard, Kansas. And from the 1930s through the 1950s the Communists published the *Daily Worker*, which periodically had several supplements, especially in Chicago and Detroit, and the *Peoples World* on the West Coast. These papers

⁴ For the Socialist Party, see James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism 1912-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984); David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1967). For the Communist Party, see Frasier M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991). Irving Howe and B.J. Widick *The American Communist Party* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1957) is a wholesale indictment of the CP by two fervent left anti-communists who make no pretense at dispassion

⁵ The best history of the CP's popular front policies is Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso Books, 1998); on Foster and the 1932 presidential campaign see Edward Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism A Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

were often the main form of open Communist participation in national and local politics and were a key ideological link for party activists who, in the main, were immersed in practical tasks and had little or no other intellectual activity. In New York City the left-liberal *PM* and its successors, the *Compass and the Star*, lasted for more than a decade but folded in the mid-1950s due to lack of finances and prohibitive costs. And the independent left weekly, *The National Guardian*, was launched during Henry Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign and was able to outlive its origins: although its circulation never exceeded 35,000, it became an influential voice for the New Left in the late 1960s.

In retrospect, one of the great political misfortunes of late 20th-century America was the failure, nay, refusal of the New Left—which by 1969 grew to popular proportions—to form a coherent radical democratic political organization that proposed the fundamental transformation of capitalism, engaged in serious theory and ideological practice, and could take a leading role in the analysis and struggles around contemporary political and cultural questions. Although the SDS undertook some of these tasks, the organizations that arose after its demise were little more than parodies of the Marxist-Leninist parties they attempted to emulate. In fact, only the Weather Underground made an effort to rethink the traditional party form that had arisen in the shadow of the Bolshevik ascent to power in Russia, proposed new organizational strategies, or, indeed, grappled with fundamental ideological questions that had been addressed by earlier revolutionaries. Nor were they particularly concerned to address the specificity of the United States, its history, its class formations, or its economic, political and cultural institutions. Instead, armed with the *Little Red Book* of Mao's timeless homilies and with Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* and (in the case of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP)) "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," a section of *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (B)*, they thereby bypassed the grueling work of rethinking. All of them, including the Weather people, adopted one version of vanguardism or another and accepted the dominant interpretations of Lenin's writings as biblical texts to be followed like an evangelical cook book. From the ashes of SDS rose two party formations, The October League and the Revolutionary Communists, both of which imagined themselves as vanguards and soon after their birth morphed into "parties" complete with central committees and political bureaus even though they remained relatively small. Each had a press with extremely limited outreach and copied the old CP strategy of intervening in the trade unions by sending their mostly young cadres into auto, steel, and other basic industries to recruit workers

into the party and hopefully influence the unions. With only a handful of exceptions—such as the RCP’s work in postal unions, the work of maoists in Ed Sadlowski’s insurgent campaign for the presidency of the Steelworkers, in their participation in Jesse Jackson’s presidential bids of 1984 and 1988, and in leading a fight to save a General Motors plant in Southern California—these interventions were not accompanied by efforts to conduct public education around their ideas. In most instances, they functioned as rank-and-file militants rather than publicly advancing their ideological perspectives, and in a few years most of the intervenors quit their factory jobs or were laid off, whereupon they returned to graduate school. Thirty-five years later, only the RCP remains a propaganda machine, which, like some of the other sects, particularly the erstwhile Trotskyist/Maoist Workers World Party, has sponsored front organizations to give them some leverage and recruiting space within the anti-war movement.

While the Marxist-Leninist formations displayed a remarkable poverty of imagination, for a time the Weather Underground provided enough revolutionary romanticism to excite a significant fraction of young radicals. Invoking, alternately, images of Bonnie and Clyde, the James Brothers, and the Bolsheviks during the Tsarist tyranny, Weather elevated underground resistance, a product of a conclusion they reached with the Black Panthers that the United States had embarked on the early phase of fascism, to a new principle. Actually the Weather people never organized a formal party. In some respects they resembled the Narodniks (Friends of the People) who came under Lenin’s surgical scrutiny at the turn of the 20th century. They believed the revolutionary process began with an educational gesture that would show the masses of youth the vulnerability of the system, so they engaged in some acts of violence against property (with some tragic, unintended loss of human life), tried to incite uprisings among high school students in working-class, often black, districts, and admonished the rest of the Left to follow their example. But since the state viewed them as criminals, they were hunted down by federal authorities for armed bank robbery and, in time, many Weather fugitives surfaced and turned themselves in.

A trained academic librarian, Hal Draper was author of several scholarly books on the history of Marxism and was also a tireless champion of a radical version of democratic socialism. For our purposes it is important only to take note of his efforts on behalf of the Berkeley Free Speech movement (FSM) of 1964 and his attempt to transform it into the base for a new self-conscious democratic socialist formation. Draper had been a member of the Independent Socialist League (ISL), which, under the tutelage of the

Communist-turned-Trotskyist Max Shachtman, refused to characterize the Soviet Union as a “workers” state. ISL debated terms such as “bureaucratic collectivism” and “state capitalism” but insisted, unlike the SWP with which it had split, that the Soviet Union was not socialist in any way. Thus, it responded to the two-camp political divisions engendered by the Cold War by proposing a “third camp” position which explicitly rejected the proposition, advanced by most non-communist left intellectuals, that one must “choose the West”, however distasteful that might appear, or render “critical support” to the Soviet Union on the basis of its abolition of private productive property. Draper broke with Schachtman over the decision to abandon the third camp and dissolve the organization into the Socialist Party which, by the 1950s, was pro-Western. But as many independent radicals discovered, in a bi-polar world there was little room for political reason. In the late 1960s Draper founded the Independent Socialists (IS), a loose federation of like-minded intellectuals and activists, some of whom were former ISL members, but most of whom were younger people who had cut their political teeth on the doctrines of the New Left. Renouncing some of its Bolshevik-Leninist origins, IS remained a radical democratic socialist movement, which, like its predecessor, avoided forming a sectarian vanguard party. In the late 1960s, IS managed to attract some of the best veterans of the FSM, SDS, and white supporters of the black freedom struggles. But it could not avoid falling into some of the characteristic pitfalls of a Marxist sect.⁶

In the early 1970s when Draper’s direct influence had receded, of sending young intellectuals into important trade unions. But the IS-ers were much more intelligent than most of the others. They made Detroit a national concentration, especially in the trucking and auto industries, where the League of Revolutionary Black Workers had given the UAW leadership many sleepless nights, and they displayed a degree of patience (not often found among radicals who expected the revolution was just around the corner), so that by the early 1980s the organization had successfully organized a viable caucus within the Teamsters Union. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) focuses narrowly on the two closely connected problems facing working teamsters, namely, the deterioration of its contract and the autocratic and corrupt nature of the union leadership. By linking the problem of union democracy with bread-and-butter issues, and by assiduously avoiding both “divisive” larger issues such as war, abortion, and other social questions, and problems of political ideology, TDU built alliances with some

⁶ Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

breakaway mainstream Teamster locals and became a genuine force in reforming the union. By 1995 it had spearheaded the election to the national Teamster presidency of Ron Carey, a Queens, New York leader of a major local of the United Parcel Service (UPS), the biggest employer in the industry. With TDU's assistance, in 1997 the Carey administration organized a national strike against UPS over the issue of the two-tier wage system and won an impressive victory, but then Carey went down over financial scandals and the old guard returned to power under Jimmy Hoffa's son, James P. However, TDU survives as the leading force within a minority caucus which still leads some of the union's large Midwest locals, among others. Building on a long dissident tradition in the Detroit region, IS members played an important role in some important UAW locals in Detroit and New Jersey, although it was not able to build a credible national movement.⁷

The true inheritor of IS, Solidarity, has carried on the best aspects of its work, mainly fighting to organize rank-and-file caucuses capable of winning leadership in unions such as New York's Transport Workers local 100, some telephone locals of the Communications Workers, and others. Solidarity's strategy remains essentially syndicalist, that is, radically trade unionist. Its members within the caucuses advocate democratic unionism, direct action methods of struggle, and transparency in the conduct of collective bargaining and grievance administration, but they do not influence workers' political decisions/tendencies outside the trade union framework. Among the best features of Solidarity's activities is the work of some of its long-time activists, particularly ex-SDS member Kim Moody, who in the early 1980s founded the monthly newspaper *Labor Notes*, arguably the best labor paper in the United States. While the paper has hued fairly rigorously to the politics of radical trade unionism, recently it has moved slightly towards a broader conception of its purview.

The first new post-War socialist organization of relatively large size formed when a substantial chunk of members of the Socialist Party split from the parent organization to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) in 1972. The move was initiated by writer Michael Harrington, who disagreed with the Socialist Party's traditional refusal to engage in fusion politics by supporting Democrats—he argued that in so doing the SP had condemned itself to being a sect—and determined to make socialist ideas relevant to practical politics. However, for Harrington

⁷ Dan LaBotz, *Rank and File Rebellion* (New York: Verso Books, 1990).

there was no question of forming a mass socialist party, either in the immediate aftermath of the split or any time in the future. DSOC was not a movement in the tradition of American socialism; rather, it patterned itself after the Communist Party's popular front policy of the fascist era. As Harrington and his colleague Irving Howe put it, DSOC's program would be the "popular front without Stalinism." DSOC would seek to effect a "political realignment" so that the Democrats would become a left-liberal party, forcing the conservatives into the Republican Party. Within this configuration socialists would be the "left wing of the possible".

In 1974, two prominent New Leftists—*Socialist Revolution* editor James Weinstein and historian and anti-Vietnam war activist Staughton Lynd—helped organize The New American Movement (NAM), whose aim was to refound the democratic socialist and radical project on specifically American grounds. The name itself signified its orientation: it would be "new" in the sense of Mills' admonition not to get bogged down in the debates of the past; "American" in its quest to address the specificity of our own situation; and a "movement" in that it was neither a party of the social-democratic (i.e. electoral) or of the Leninist variety nor an association that enrolled members who agreed with its principles but did not intend to be active. From the start NAM sought to revive the Muste project: to align a significant fraction of the New Left with a parallel group of "old" leftists who had been disaffected from the Stalinist and Trotskyist orthodoxies but who possessed long political experience and ideological sophistication that would be valuable for a movement composed, primarily, of younger people. Among the early recruits was Dorothy Healey, who had been long-time chair of the CP's Southern California district and had recently resigned from the party. Healey's adherence to NAM symbolized the intention of bringing in the old into the new, but she was among the few that that took this step.

Although the two founders abandoned the organization shortly after its first convention, during NAM's almost nine years of life it managed to recruit some 1500 members, a relatively high proportion of whom were activists. With some 25 chapters, NAM marked itself off from many other formations by emphasizing the educational and cultural development of its own members as well as non-affiliated leftists. In several cities it ran rather successful socialist schools, which offered courses in political economy, politics, international relations, and cultural subjects, and which occasionally sponsored weekend children's activities. Prior to its annual conventions, NAM offered an intensive weeklong institute on Marxism, particularly weighted towards the work of Antonio Gramsci. But plagued by perennial

financial problems, and facing the virtual “retirement” of a considerable portion of its activists who were anxious to get on with their careers, in 1983 a sharply divided NAM national committee decided to merge with DSOC. The new organization was christened Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and was led by Harrington.

DSOC was much larger than NAM; at the time of the merger in the spring of 1983, it claimed nearly 5000 members, among them trade union leaders of considerable stature. Harrington was a genius at collecting notables, but the organization had only a handful of functioning locals. Harrington ruminated that since socialism was not on the agenda of American politics, DSOC had to rely on “smoke and mirrors” to present a semblance of relevance and showed little interest in problems of organization. DSOC’s relevance, he thought, was to be a catalyst in the formation of a significant left wing within the Democratic Party, based chiefly on the progressive trade unions. DSOC’s main activities were to work within the Democratic party on the road to what Shachtman, Harrington’s old mentor, called “political realignment”, and operating as an informal hiring hall for progressive union staffs. After Harrington’s death from cancer in 1990, the organization went into steep decline, for despite his formidable political and intellectual talents Harrington was indifferent to the process of internal political education or public socialist propaganda. His favorite slogan, that DSA would be the “left wing of the possible,” strictly precluded utopian or radical thinking as a political act. As a result, DSA was dull and uninspiring to those who were becoming radicals.

WHAT IS POLITICAL OPPOSITION?

The idea of a party system was initially controversial to many of the leading lights of the American Revolution. For example, George Washington may have refused to accept the mantle of royalty but, as Richard Hofstadter has shown, he saw the presidency in the imperial model. John Adams and Alexander Hamilton insisted that a strong, centralized national government was necessary both to protect the fledgling United States from its foreign enemies and to facilitate national economic development and preferred to create a government which ruled without significant opposition. It fell to the agrarians and artisans, led by Thomas Jefferson, to propose a party system that could insure that the executive branch would not become a self-perpetuating aristocracy and that sovereignty would remain in the Congress which, however imperfect (universal manhood suffrage was not enacted

until 1828 and black slaves and women were completely excluded), remains the most representative institution of national government.⁸

If the idea of a systemic opposition to established authority was largely won by 1800, when Jefferson defeated Adams, it had to be a *legitimate* opposition. That is, against Jefferson's earlier statement that when the people "shall grow weary of the existing government they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it," the opposition was now sworn to uphold the constitution, especially its declaration of individual liberties such as free speech and the collective right to assembly (to protest existing policies and laws) and private property rights. The term "legitimate opposition" has pervaded party systems in North America and most of Western Europe since the inception of constitutional democracy. The opposition is legitimate if, and only if, it remains loyal to the precepts of liberal democracy and to its constitution, whether formally installed or not. "The rule of law" is, by the tacit political consent, understood to be the ultimate constraint upon political action; the opposition party may wish to change the law but pledges to do so within the principles and procedures established by the constitution.

Indeed, the Alien and Sedition Acts, passed by Congress during the Adams presidency and under the influence of Hamilton, attempted to define the concept of opposition itself as seditious and "alien"—that is, imported from France. Jefferson, the drafter of the Declaration of Independence, was elected on the idea that a legitimate opposition was consistent with the ideals of the revolution because its aims were well within constitutional legality. His Democratic Republican party understood that power was never permanent, except the power inherent in the precepts of liberal capitalist democracy. Under these rules, the workingmen's parties created during the regime of Andrew Jackson worked for local reforms such as free public education, limitations on the working day, and other legitimate demands. None adopted the revolutionary aims of the various political formations in Europe, although some were sympathetic to Robert Owens' utopian socialist experiments in the United States. It was not until the American Federation of Labor drafted its constitution that the idea that unions were constituted to engage in a "class struggle" to secure a better living standard and working conditions was promoted. Without declaring revolutionary aims, a major labor organization enunciated the marxian concept of irreconcilable antagonism between labor and capital.

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

In 1848 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels drafted a “Manifesto of the Communist Party” for the Communist League, first a German workingmen’s association, later an international organization, and, as Engels says in his 1888 preface to the English edition, “unavoidably a secret society.” We commonly refer to the document as *The Communist Manifesto*, but it is important to remember that its authors wrote it as the statement of a political party. Clearly, they were not interested in writing a program for a “legitimate” opposition to prevailing authority since “*the immediate aim* of the communists is the same as that of all proletarian parties; formation of proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” (emphasis mine). They continue: “The distinguishing feature of communism is not the abolition of property generally but the abolition of bourgeois property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, the exploitation of the many by the few.”⁹ No political opposition within the context of liberal capitalist democracy that was serious about such aims could long expect to be tolerated by the ruling order for which the protection of bourgeois property is always an incontrovertible premise. When, periodically, communists and revolutionary socialists are indicted, stand trial, and are convicted of sedition, conspiracy, and other state crimes, the prosecutors are often liberal democrats, members of an officialdom that fervently believes that with the establishment of constitutional rights the right to revolution must be permanently laid to rest and that the exercise—even advocacy—of this right may stand outside the purview of accepted definitions of freedom.

The imperatives of liberal democracy have bedeviled European Marxists since, in the aftermath of the suspension of the anti-socialist laws in Germany, they formed social-democratic parties. While proclaiming their revolutionary aims, in the interest of winning necessary reforms for their primary working-class constituencies after 1870 the social democrats decided to participate in parliamentary elections. Between 1875 and 1914 they became so powerful that at the outbreak of the war they held the balance of power in some countries in Western Europe. But success within the context of bourgeois democracy was fraught with problems, at least from the perspective of the social-democrats’ revolutionary pretensions.

⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis Feuer (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

Engels's allusion to one such problem might help explain the long record of socialist consent to the rule of law: a spectre of communism might have haunted 19th century Europe, but on the ground was the real tyranny—of absolutist and reactionary states in France before and after the Commune, of Tsarist dictatorship in Russia, and of Germany's anti-socialist laws—that greeted social democracy and the organizations and doctrine of revolutionary marxism with exile and imprisonment. To achieve the status of legitimate opposition, to enjoy the privileges of ordinary civil liberties was, indeed, a great achievement not to be sneered at. If most social democrats recognized the fragility of their newly-won rights at the turn of the 20th century, many were hesitant to abandon them voluntarily. Thus, legitimacy and its obligations became habitual for many social democrats and their parties, a habituation abetted by real reforms that they and the workers' movements won within parliament and at the workplace.

In 1899 a major German party leader, Eduard Bernstein, published *Evolutionary Socialism*, a virtual reformist manifesto. The major thesis of the book was that the working class and its party were destined to transform capitalism, not by revolution but by the cumulative effects of their successful struggles for reform. His motto, "the final goal, whatever it may be, is nothing; the movement is everything," signified what he noted had already occurred: revolutionary socialism was already an empty phrase, a slogan relegated to speeches and pamphlets. In practice revolution had been rendered unnecessary by the victories achieved through the parliamentary process and by trade union action.

Although most of the major party theoreticians and leaders—notably Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, and August Bebel—soundly refuted Bernstein's position, the issue remains ideologically and theoretically viable. The labor and socialist movements' impressive struggles to achieve social insurance, legally sanctioned shorter working hours, child labor legislation and many other reforms *within the prevailing system of bourgeois property relations* had, in effect, pushed the aim of transforming capitalism root and branch into the background. And in the process of engaging in parliamentary struggle, socialists had developed loyalty to liberal democratic institutions. Bernstein argued, following the work of Rudolph Hilferding, that capitalism had entered a phase of a high level of organization which would preclude systemic crises could expect gradually to exact concessions from capital without resort to the measures taken during the Paris Commune or the 1848 French, German, and Italian revolutions. Relying on Marx's own arguments, Luxemburg demonstrated that the inherent tendency of capitalist overproduction and falling

profit rates would lead to crises; and Lenin advanced the view that war was both an expression and a displacement of the crisis tendencies of the system. In *Social Reform or Revolution*, her famous refutation of Bernstein's theses, Luxemburg did not renounce reform struggles but emphasized their temporary nature; under no circumstances could the working class expect economic security and permanently rising living standards as long as capital ruled.

But the social democrats' successes within the framework of parliamentary liberal democracy were simply too impressive for many to accept the proposition of revolutionary intransigence. By the dawn of World War I, it was plain to many trade unionists and socialist parliamentarians that advanced capitalism, as contrasted to its competitive, cutthroat predecessor, had produced a large economic surplus that was available to the workers and their parties—if they maintained a high level of militancy and political will. While Bernstein's views may have been scorned by marxist orthodoxy, they seemed to resemble social and political reality more than dire predictions of impending systemic crisis. Moreover, what may be described as the *institutionalization* of social democracy—that is, its correspondence to the Weberian model of bureaucratization—made it likely that labor and socialist parties would become integrated into their own national frameworks and that the material interests of the labor movement, intellectuals, and the middle strata that had been attracted to social democracy could be fulfilled within, and not necessarily against, the prevailing social and political order. In his classic work, *Political Parties*, Robert Michels argued that in spite of their democratic professions, socialist parties had become hierarchical and autocratic organizations. Through its control over the party press and internal communications, and through its role in representing the party's program in parliament and in the popular media, the top leadership exercised control over the party's rank and file and became progressively less in touch with their needs.

Seeking to protect their material and political gains, but also having assimilated nationalist aspirations, in 1914 most socialist and workers parties with parliamentary representation voted war credits to their respective governments. These "renegade" acts led Lenin and Luxemburg to conclude that the forty-year experiment in parliamentary socialism was seriously flawed and had to be abandoned. Lenin theorized that World War I was a marker of the general crisis of the system. In his 1916 pamphlet *Imperialism*, Lenin theorized that capitalist collapse would begin "at the weakest link of the imperialist chain," and he predicted that the outcome of the war would be a prolonged period of world revolution which would begin among the

masses of the defeated countries, including Russia, which, although ostensibly on the winning side, was actually defeated by Germany. Indeed, when, upon wresting power from the liberal Democratic Kerensky government, the Bolsheviks had to sue for peace with Germany before the General Armistice of 1918, his view proved prescient. By 1919 Russia and Hungary had communist governments and a Bavarian Soviet Republic was declared. But the German revolution ended when the social-democratic government ordered the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Leibnicht, whose Spartacist League had executed a short-lived uprising to overthrow the government.¹⁰

The revolutionary period having been exhausted—the Hungarian communist regime lasted just 133 days, the Bavarian Soviet fell apart even more quickly, and the Italian factory occupations did not swell to revolutionary activity—in 1920 Lenin announced a new phase of relative capitalist “stabilization” and advised communists to dig in and take advantage of democratic institutions in the leading capitalist states by joining with established unions and other workers’ parties in the struggles for reform. Needless to say, the social democrats were not eager to accept the Communist offers for a united front in actions against capital and the state. The 1920s was a decade of increasing isolation of the revolutionary forces even where, as in Germany, they succeeded in building a mass working-class base.¹¹

It is not excessive to observe that, from the perspective of the world-view articulated by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the movement for fundamental social change has been on the defensive in the advanced capitalist societies for more than three quarters of a century and that it can only really be seen in the extraordinary movements for national independence in the colonial and semi-colonial nations. In fact, the cleavage between social reform and revolution has widened, and while revolutionary ideas continue to serve as inspiration, the everyday activities of the parties and trade unions are devoted exclusively to reform of the existing system. The social-democratic parties in the most advanced capitalist countries have settled into a pattern according to which the party consists chiefly in its parliamentary delegation and the campaign apparatuses created to win elective offices. In fact, after World War II the Socialist and Social Democratic parties resolved, at their party congresses, to permanently adopt

¹⁰ V.I. Lenin, “Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism,” *Little Lenin Library* (New York: International Publishers, 1929).

¹¹ V.I. Lenin, “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder,” *Little Lenin Library* (New York: International Publishers, 1929).

the role of legitimate opposition when not in power and to seek to become parties of government, within the framework of capitalism. Even the left-wing of, say, the British Labor Party, or the French Socialists, or the French and Italian Communist parties themselves hesitate at the prospect of revolution or even proposals for fundamental change. They have flirted with ideas and programs of workers' control, but when they have had the power to nationalize industries it has been invariably under a regime of hierarchical management. The trade unions have become more autonomous even if, as in the case of the British Labor Party, they remain affiliated. In some instances the relative distance between unions and the party has been advantageous to workers who are inclined to engage in direct action against capital. But it is also a sign of the consequence of the transition from opposition to parties of "government." As parties of government, the socialists are responsible for administering the institutions of the capitalist state. And within this perspective, it places the party, as administrator, in potential conflict with labor.

As Carl Schorske has brilliantly chronicled, German Social Democracy between 1905 and 1917 constituted a "state within a state." The party was home for the overwhelming majority of its members and a considerable part of its constituency as well. For the parliamentary delegation and trade unions, a third wing existed which provided a wide-range of education and cultural life to its adherents. Schorske shows that this all-enveloping series of activities and social relationships may have isolated the party's rank and file from the rest of the German population and, for this reason, had some dire consequences. However, the importance of establishing, for adults and youth alike, a culture of education, art, and sports counter to the prevailing capitalist cultural and educational institutions was generally recognized as a central contribution to the development of class consciousness. But with the growing reliance on parliamentary reforms—a vital element in the transformation of social democracy into a legitimate opposition—the ideological element in social democracy receded. The parties' educational, sports, and cultural institutions—upon which the traditional social-democratic and communist parties relied for raising the intellectual and cultural level of leaders and activists in the party organizations, unions, and social movements and for the development of cadres—have been reduced or have disappeared.¹²

¹² Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).

By the 1960s it was apparent to many intellectuals, young workers, and political activists that the main political parties of the Left were bankrupt. The rise of a New Left in all western nations was as dramatic as it was short-lived. The French May of 1968, the Italian Hot Autumn the following year, and the massive anti-war demonstrations and civil rights struggles in the United States were collective expressions of a new burst of anti-establishment, anti-parliamentary, and anti-capitalist political will. The mutation of the revolutionary socialist and communist movements into parties of reform and of government produced not only widespread disaffection among intellectuals and activists from the "left" parties but spawned a series of "new" social movements which consciously spurn the concept of "party" itself.

The exception, the global phenomenon of Green parties, may be understood in the framework of the revolt of the ecology movement against the social-democratic mainstream rather than as an attempt for form a new radical party. That project was largely defeated in the 1990s when, in an exemplary internal struggle, the German Greens divided over the question of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary perspectives. Founded in the 1970s as a movement/party dedicated to direct action, in a country where electoral divisions between the Center-Left and Right were extremely close, the "realies"(Greens dedicated to parliamentary politics) won the internal battle and soon grasped the chance to affect the balance of power. After winning as much as 10% of the vote in federal elections and elective office in many municipalities, the Greens eventually helped their coalition partner, the Social Democrats, to regain national power and accepted cabinet positions, including the powerful foreign ministry. However, in most countries, including the United States, the 1970s saw the feminist, ecology, and a considerable fraction of the black freedom movements distance themselves from the parties of the center and left in order to retain their freedom of action even while they continued to influence their policies. Then came the Reagan revolution. The leadership of these movements began to falter, nearly all of them reevaluated their stances, and, in most cases, they enlisted in electoral, coalition politics subsumed under an increasingly center-right Democratic Party that tempered their radical will.

PARTY AND CLASS

Among the fundamental concepts of historical materialism is what Karl Korsch terms "the principle of historical specification." According to

Korsch, categories such as labor, capital, value, profit, etc. are subject to the historically specific context within which they function. For this reason, the significations of these categories change as well. In the debate about the role of the party—questions of its relation to revolutionary class consciousness, problems of organization, and issues of strategy and tactics—there are few, if any, principles that transcend conditions of time and place. For example, Lenin’s major writings on political organization were produced under the Tsarist tyranny when social democratic parties and trade unions were illegal and strikes were banned. Both Lenin and his adversaries, for example, assumed, at the turn of the century, that capitalism had reached a state of crisis—it was both on the brink of profound economic crises and on an almost inevitable trajectory toward war—and that the rise of the labor and socialist movements presented “objective” possibilities for revolutionary action.¹³

Against two tendencies within the Russian movement—the so-called “economists” who advocated almost exclusive attention to trade union struggles, and those who favored a decentralized party or at least a weak center—Lenin argued, on the one hand, for politics and for political organization and, on the other, for a strong party center. In his polemic against the views of Vladimir Akimov and other proto-syndicalists, he stressed the significance of specifically political struggles, including those in the Duma (parliament) where, periodically, the government opted to initiate representative assemblies. Moreover, he argued against the expressed as well as the implicit position of large sections of the party that the working class, in the course of struggles around elementary needs, would achieve revolutionary class consciousness. Lenin’s argument against Martov for strict centralization is based, largely, on the fact that the workers’ movement was obliged to operate underground, where the violation of secrecy was often an invitation to the police. He views both tendencies as worshipful of the spontaneity of the masses, with a strong affinity for anarchism.¹⁴

For Lenin, following his theoretical mentor Karl Kautsky, the working class can only achieve trade union consciousness in the course of its struggles for economic justice; revolutionary class consciousness must be brought to the

¹³ Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961)chapter one

¹⁴ On the economists, see V.I. Lenin, “What is to be Done?” *Little Lenin Library* (New York: International Publishers, 1929) ; on centralization see V.I. “Lenin, One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” *Little Lenin Library* (New York: International Publishers, 1929). On his misrepresentation of the economists see Jonathan Frankel, *Vladimir Akimov and the Dilemma of Russian Marxism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

working class “from the outside,” specifically from intellectuals organized in revolutionary parties as professional revolutionaries. It is they who provide education for the most “advanced” working class leaders, recruiting them into the ranks of social democracy and into the center. But for Lenin, as for other contemporary revolutionaries, there is never any doubt that ultimately the task of working class emancipation falls on the most class-conscious contingent of the workers themselves:

Firstly, the active elements of the Social-Democratic working-class party will include not only the organizations of the revolutionaries, but a *whole number* of workers’ organizations recognized as party organizations. Secondly, how, and by what logic, does the fact that we are a party of a class warrant the conclusion that it is unnecessary to make a distinction between those who *belong* to the party and those who associate themselves with it? Just the contrary: precisely because there are differences in consciousness and degree of activity, a distinction must be made of proximity to the Party. We are a party of a class, and therefore almost the entire class . . . should act under the leadership of our party. But it would be . . . tailism to think that the entire class, or almost the entire class, can ever rise, under capitalism, to the level of consciousness and activity of its vanguard, of its Social Democratic Party. No sensible Social-Democrat has ever doubted that under capitalism even the trade union organizations . . . are incapable of embracing the entire, or almost the entire, working class. To forget the distinction between the vanguard and the whole of the masses gravitating towards it, to forget the vanguard’s constant duty of raising ever wider sections to its own advanced level, means simply to deceive oneself, to shut one’s eyes to the immensity of our tasks, and to narrow down these tasks. (*What is to be Done*, 7)

It fell to Rosa Luxemburg to reply to Lenin’s stringent conception of Russian Social-Democracy. But it was not only as a marxist theorist that Luxemburg claimed authority to speak. As a founder and leader of one of the two Polish Social-Democratic parties, which at the time were closely associated with the Russian party owing to Poland’s annexation by the Tsarist regime, she was vitally interested in developments within the Russian party. Noting that, “There is no doubt that, in general a strong tendency toward centralism is inherent in Social Democracy” since it “grows in the economic soil of capitalism, which itself tends towards centralism,” Social Democracy is “called upon to represent within the framework of a given state, the totality of the interests of the proletariat as a class, opposed to all partial and group interests. Therefore,” she concludes, “it follows that Social

Democracy has the natural aspiration of welding together all national, religious, and professional groups of the working class into a unified party.”¹⁵

So far, she agrees with Lenin’s general argument for centralism. But Luxemburg departs from Lenin on two points: she calls his idea that the Party center has the right and duty to intervene on a *tactical level* on all matters local as well as national “conservative” and believes that it might result in stifling “innovations” that can only arise in the course of actual struggles; and she vehemently disagrees with the Kautsky/Lenin thesis about how revolutionary class consciousness occurs. Now the concept of “spontaneity” has remained ambiguous in these debates. For example, in her article “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy,” Rosa Luxemburg advances a thesis which cannot easily be described as a statement in favor of spontaneity.

While acknowledging the importance of the party’s role in political education, cultural development and agitation, Luxemburg holds that social democratic action

grows historically out of the elementary class struggle. It thus moves in the dialectical contradiction that here the proletarian army is first recruited in the struggle itself and only in the struggle does it become aware of the objectives of the struggle. Here organization, enlightenment, and struggle are not separated mechanically, and also temporarily, different moments as in the case of the Blanquist movement [a conspiratorial organization prominent in the 1830 French rebellion]. Here they are only different sides of the same process. On the one hand, apart from the general principle of the struggle, there is no ready-made pre-established detailed set of tactics which a central committee can teach its Social Democratic membership as if they were an army of recruits. On the other hand, the process of the struggle, which creates the organization, leads to a continual fluctuation of the sphere of influence of Social Democracy.¹⁶

Although both agree that the party is nothing other than an organization of the workers’ movement—because, as the movement’s most theoretically prepared force it can grasp the relationship of sectoral struggles to the totality—Luxemburg’s refusal of the concept of tactical centralism is by no

¹⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, “Organizational Questions of Social Democracy,” in *Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press), 287.

¹⁶ Luxemburg, 289-90.

means identical to Lenin's attribution of bowing to "spontaneity" to his opponents. Revolutionary socialist parties tend to centralism, that is, they attempt to "weld together" disparate elements, to overcome the "atomization" of various sectors of the workers' movement so that, in Luxemburg's own words, the party "can be nothing but the imperative summation of the will and the fighting vanguard of the working class as opposed to its individual groups and members." According to Luxemburg this is, so to speak, a "self-centralism of the leading stratum of the proletariat; it is the rule of the majority within its own party organization."¹⁷

In these passages there is a striking convergence as well as difference between Lenin and Luxemburg. Both agree to the propositions that: (1) the party is necessary and is a vanguard of the working class composed chiefly of revolutionary workers and intellectuals; (2) it requires centralism to fulfill its tasks, chief among which is the job of (3) welding together disparate elements to exercise unified political will. But the argument is in the implications of terms such as "centralism" and "vanguard." Lenin's conception of the party centralism was one of "control," both of its own ranks as well as the course of the struggle; Luxemburg speaks of "self-centralism" and rejects the idea that the party brings revolutionary class consciousness to the workers from the "outside." Instead it is part of the struggle and subject to fluctuations in its influence because the struggle is, in many respects, unpredictable. Lenin writes from the perspective of a revolutionary elite, which, because of its advanced consciousness and political education, has earned the right to lead in matters of strategy and tactics as well as general orientation. On the other hand, Luxemburg believes the vanguard is forged in the course of struggle and that leadership in the day-to-day battles emerges from the ground up.

Thus, according to Luxemburg, the party is a tendency within the class struggle whose influence, let alone leadership, can only be earned, not assumed on the basis of its mastery of marxist science of revolution. However, in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, the Leninist conception of the party and its vanguard role overcame the Luxemburgist objections (objections advanced, among others, by the Council Communist group, which included Korsch, a German communist who served in the Bundestag as representative of the dissident Communist Workers Party (KAPD), and the Dutch left-socialists, the astronomer Anton

¹⁷ Luxemburg, 290.

Pannekoek and Herman Gorter) a fact attributable to the command exercised by the Communist International led by the Bolsheviks. Writing under the pseudonym “J. Harper” against Leninist ideas of centralized control, Pannekoek advanced Luxemburgist conceptions of the party when he argued that parliamentary struggle was subordinate to the party’s extra-parliamentary roles of encouraging workers to undertake direct industrial action, exposing the class collaborationist role of post-war social democracy, and promoting working class international solidarity against capital.

Armed with their dire assessments of the degeneration of the Communist parties into cabals of bureaucratic centralism, and with an analysis of the Soviet Union as a new form of tyranny, by the 1930s the “left” communists, although still marxist in their political and theoretical orientation, renounced party formations and all forms of political centralization as instances of groups of intellectuals and bureaucrats who imposed “dictatorship over the proletariat” and not alongside it. In Gorter’s words, parties tend to “dominate the masses.”¹⁸

The left communists became known as council communists when they decisively rejected Marx and Lenin’s conception of the “transitional state.” Pannekoek published his political magnum opus, *Workers Councils*, which comes close to associationism in its argument against political centralism, both at the level of political organization and of the state form itself, and in its description of how associations of workers’ councils might collectively control production and the distribution of goods, conceived as use rather than exchange values in the capitalist sense, and self-manage society as a whole. Pannekoek’s thesis is that the Paris Commune, the Russian and German Soviets, the Italian occupations, the and workers’ rebellions in other countries had already shown that they were capable of conceiving of a society without hierarchy and that, without party control, they would be able to invent new forms of self-management.

Thus the workers’ councils brought to theoretical fruition Luxemburg’s worst fears concerning parties that control their members and, through

¹⁸ The Councilists were prolific writers. *Workers Councils* provides a fairly comprehensive account of their view of communism (Anton Pannekoek, *Workers Councils*, introduction by Noam Chomsky (Oakland: AK Press, 2003). See also: Anton Pannekoek, “The Party and the Working Class” (1936), which is available online from the Marxists.org Internet Archive: (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1936/party-working-class.htm>); see also the running commentary on the Communists and the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s in *New Essays* five volumes (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971).

power within workers' organizations, the working class itself. The organizations the council communists maintained until the mid-1940s were brought together by the regular publication of *International Council Correspondence*, followed by the journal *New Essays*, which was published in several languages. Like the historical socialist and communist movements, the press remained their ideological center, while the groups that adhered to their politics constituted a loose federation that met periodically but had no binding power to decide anything for the groups. Thus, although intellectually Marxists—their economic and political analysis followed closely the critical perspective of Marx himself rather than the second or third international orthodoxies—they came to adhere to the anarchists' federated principle of political organization. But most of the ICC groups opposed World War II, characterizing it as an unprincipled struggle between two rival authoritarian camps. Under the overwhelming weight of the bi-polar world that followed the War, they met the fate of other third camp movements—they disappeared.

THE PARTY IN A NON-REVOLUTIONARY ERA

We have already noted that, the Russian revolution aside, by 1919-20 popular uprisings, sometimes in the form of seizures of state power, and sometimes in the form of mass strikes, especially in Italy and the United States, were spent. The 1920s were years of retreat for the workers' movement. In Germany and the United Kingdom, where the bourgeoisie was weak, socialist parties were able to win governmental power, but were unable to sustain it in the wake of weak economies. A socialist government that presides over mass unemployment is not likely to inspire confidence. The United States, triumphant in the war, entered a fifteen-year period of reaction as the labor and radical movements were decimated by a combination of employer and police power and by the perfidy of the AFL.

In Eastern and Southern Europe, fascist and proto-fascist military regimes took power. And two luminaries of the newly formed international communist movement, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci exemplified the fate of the revolutionary intellectuals in countries seized by counterrevolutionary force. Lukács, a leading Hungarian intellectual who had joined the Communist Party, served as Minister of Culture in the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. When the government collapsed, he was forced into exile and settled for a decade in Vienna, where, in sharp contrast to his largely literary past, he worked as a full-time revolutionary. Gramsci, an editor of a

newspaper, a major figure in the Turin factory occupations of 1920, and later the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, was imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime in 1926 and died in prison eleven years later.

These personal circumstances, combined with the ebbing of the revolutionary movement, became the occasion for two of the more original and discerning reflections on problems of political organization in a non-revolutionary period. Precisely because of the particular character of the interwar period, it became possible to consider these issues with a degree of reflexivity missing in the earlier debates. (Recall that Lenin and Luxemburg were fully confident that the urgency of issues of party organization were directly related to the fact that, in their judgment, the first two decades of the 20th century constituted a revolutionary situation when the class war would imminently take the form of an assault on the capitalist state.) The questions for Lukács and Gramsci were: In a period of relative capitalist stabilization what are the forms of praxis for revolutionary forces? What is the relation of theory to practice? Is it possible to build the movement such that it avoids the formation of a tight bureaucratic leadership?¹⁹

Every essay in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness (HCC)* (1923) was written from Vienna in the context of his period of work as a leader of the illegal Hungarian Communist Party. And that this world famous philosopher and literary critic devoted himself to practical politics for a decade has been lost on many of his readers, who tend to study this writing as an instance of Marxist scholarship. Although Lukács is an exemplary scholar, *History and Class Consciousness* must be understood as a contribution to political theory. Without the perspective of the economic and political situation in Europe, *HCC* becomes, in some respects, unintelligible. Or put more generously, when seen in an essentially apolitical way, the central arguments of even the most philosophical essays can be grasped only partially. Yet the essays of *HCC*, *Lenin* (1924), and his second collection from this period *Tactics and Ethics* (1968-1972) contain some of the more valuable reflections on the problems of political organization in a non-revolutionary period. Many readers of *HCC* (which was reissued in German in 1967 and first appeared in English four years later) are inevitably drawn to two essays: "What is Orthodox Marxism?" in which Lukács defends the materialist dialectic, especially the concept of the totality and its corollary,

¹⁹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971); Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, introduction Rodney Livingstone and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

the indissoluble relation of the subject and object as constitutive of the totality; and the magisterial "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," actually an elaboration of the same themes, with particular emphases on the philosophical underpinning of the subject/object split in everyday life and the objective basis of this split in the universalization of the commodity-form in capitalist society. Lukács's conception of reification, derived from his reading of Marx's *Capital* (but owing it elaboration to Georg Simmel), is that in a capitalist system dominated by commodity production and exchange, relations between people take on the appearance of relations between things. That is, subjectivity is subsumed under reified objects. Read in the context of the debates over political organizations rather than as an occasional work of philosophical reflection, Lukács provides a "scientific" and philosophical basis for Lenin's claim that revolutionary class consciousness cannot arise from the workers' struggle. For Lukács that struggle is always conditioned by (a) a rationalization in which every aspect of human activity can be calculated and classified into "specialized systems," (b) "the fragmentation of human production [which] necessarily entails fragmentation of its subject," (c) the division of labor, and (d) the hierarchies produced by the occupational structure of the labor market. But at the core of the argument is his claim that, under the domination of capital, workers see themselves as fragmented objects rather than subjects of the historical process.²⁰

Consciousness, therefore, is not lodged in perception or individual understanding. The perception and understanding are determined by the logic of capital, but, read in isolation, "Reification" might be interpreted as an argument for either voluntarism, the doctrine according to which even adverse objective circumstances can be overcome by revolutionary will, or fatalism, the concept that the capitalist crisis will, under its own weight, lead to the system's self-destruction. Lukács's theory of political organization refutes these antinomies. Argued in philosophical terms, even in "Reification" Lukács provides the basis for a methodology of political organization. Beyond political discourse itself, Lukács sees the root of contemporary conceptions of the subject/object split in Kantian ethics. He addresses Kant, not only because Kant's three *Critiques* dominated German and French philosophy for almost a century after Hegel's death in 1831, but also because Kantian ideas had permeated some of the leading figures of international socialism, notably Bernstein; Max Adler, the leader of Austrian Social

²⁰ Lukács, *HCC*, 88-92.

Democracy; and some of the Russian intelligentsia as well. In his view, unless a sound philosophical basis is established for the objective possibility of revolutionary class consciousness, efforts to make change are likely to founder on the twin fallacies of objectivism and voluntarism. The task, according to Lukács, is to provide a structural basis for explaining both the reproduction of bourgeois consciousness within the proletariat in the wake of crises and war and the objective possibility of class consciousness.

Condemning what he calls the “contemplative attitude” towards social reality, in which the “thing-in-itself” is not available to consciousness, he argues:

. . . in order to overcome the irrationality of the question of the thing-in-itself it is not enough that the attempt should be made to transcend the contemplative attitude. When the question is formulated more concretely it turns out that the essence of praxis consists in annulling *that indifference of form towards content that we found in the problem of the thing-in-itself*. Thus praxis can only be established as a philosophical principle if, at the same time, a conception of form can be found whose basis and validity no longer rest on that pure rationality and that freedom from every definition of content. In so far as the principle of praxis is the prescription for changing reality, it must be tailored to the concrete material substratum of action if it is to impinge upon it to any effect.²¹

These concepts underlie Lukács’s major statement on the party, “Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization,” the last chapter of *HCC*. In the article Lukács advances a bold definition: organization is, “at once the form of mediation between theory and practice”²² and, more generally, “the concrete mediation between man and history—this is the decisive characteristic of the organization now being born.”²³ In these passages Lukács stresses the fallacies of the inherent hierarchy present in many workers’ parties, which overestimate the importance of the individual—that is the leader and his activity and the complementary “fatalistic” passivity and subordination of the masses. Both tendencies lead to bureaucratization of the party and thwart the development of a movement that promotes “real active participation” of members in every event, in the full scope of party life.

²¹ Lukács, *HCC*, 125-126.

²² Lukács, *HCC*, 299

²³ Lukács, *HCC*, 318.

The idea of organization as the “concrete mediation between man and history” is closely linked to the problems of fragmentation and rationalization raised in “Reification.” Every struggle is necessarily partial: workers employed by a single capitalist enterprise or in a single industry fight for higher wages (or, most recently, against wage cuts) or for better working conditions; tenants oppose landlords’ demands for more rent; communities fight developers seeking to gentrify their neighborhoods or destroy natural systems for commercial uses; blacks and other oppressed minorities fight for civil rights and women for sexual and gender equality. The party is, in the first place, the mediation between these struggles and the fight against capital. For example, it must show the class dimension in the struggle for abortion rights and the sexual dimension of labor struggles. Second, the party indicates the principles for a better life that are inherent in these struggles and why this aspiration is frustrated by the priorities of employer, landlord, developer, government officials, and (white) men. Third, does the party expose the role of the state in these struggles? Whose side is it on? What are the necessary tasks regarding legislation and what are the costs of legal solutions versus direct action? We will return to some of these questions in the next and final section.

Antonio Gramsci developed his political theory while in a fascist prison. His captivity was the outcome of the success of the counterrevolution against the 1920 Turin factory occupations and his founding of the Communist Party with other left-Socialists who had heeded the call of the CI to form revolutionary parties linked to the international. Since 1924 Gramsci had been General Secretary of the party. Since its founding in 1920, he had conducted a fierce ideological struggle against the so-called “left” Communists led by Amadeo Bordiga, who had actually called the meeting to form the party. Arrested in 1926 under suspicion of participating in a plot to assassinate Mussolini, by 1929 Gramsci was tried by his fascist captors for attempting an armed insurrection and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Between 1929 and 1933, he wrote many notebooks, five of which have been edited and translated into English by Joseph Buttigieg. Under the watchful eye of the censor, Gramsci was obliged to invent his own vocabulary—which consisted not only of euphemisms for conventional terms, but provided graphic descriptions of them—and smuggle the material out, which he succeeded in doing thanks to his friend, the economist Piero Sraffa, and his sister-in-law Tatiana. The immense scope of these works can be explained not only by the fact that he had been trained as a “traditional” intellectual and was familiar with many languages, the natural and human sciences, the arts, philosophy, sociological theory, and

politics, but also by his conception of the movement as more than transformative of the nature of property, but as a vehicle for the development of the full capacities of individuals. Like Lenin, Luxemburg, and Lukács, Gramsci held that the party was a fusion of the most class-conscious workers and revolutionary intellectuals. To make sure it did not degenerate into the private preserve of the latter, the party had to develop a broad-ranging educational program both for its own cadres and for the “masses,” not only in the scientific aspects of Marxism, but in the whole range of literary and philosophical works that mark the Enlightenment as well. The key task of party education was to help develop critical self-consciousness:

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an elite [that is, politically specialized] of intellectuals. A human mass does not “distinguish” itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people ‘specialised’ in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings in which the loyalty of the masses is sorely tried.²⁴

Gramsci then stresses that this task is tied to the dialectic between intellectuals and masses, in which the latter develops to a “higher level of culture” and whose influence on intellectuals is decisive for their own development. In turn the intellectuals, “organically” linked to the subaltern classes, conduct a struggle to impose a new common sense within civil society.

The importance of the development of intellectuals becomes clearer when we consider one of Gramsci’s more celebrated formulations. Consistent with the principle of historical specification, Gramsci argues that there are two aspects to the struggle for social transformation: the war of maneuver, in which the revolutionary movement, of which the party (after Machiavelli, “The Modern Prince”) is its leading detachment, undertakes the assault on the state; and the war of position, the period when the possibility of revolution has been foreclosed to the proletariat and its allies. The moment of the war of position is characterized by two extremely

²⁴ Gramsci, *Selections*, 334.

important party activities, both of which fall largely, if not exclusively, on intellectuals. Stating that every class in history seeking power must prevail at the ideological as well as the military/political level, Gramsci claims that the possibility of winning a war of maneuver depends both on the level of organization and the strength of the movement and, crucially, on the capacity of the workers' movement and its intellectuals to impose a new "common sense" on society as a whole. By "common sense" Gramsci connotes a disaggregated collection of myths, deeds, and superstitions that constitute bourgeois hegemony and that are in dialectical tension with "good sense." As long as the constellation of ruling ideas prevail, every struggle will remain local, fragmented, and even perceived by the workers and other subalterns in terms of those hegemonic ideas. For Gramsci critical understanding presupposes a struggle of "political hegemonies" pulling in opposite directions. Where there is no contest of hegemonies the ruling common sense will inevitably undermine the significance of what might otherwise become a generalized battle. One of the main tasks of the war of position is to create a new common sense.

One American example may illustrate what a counter-hegemonic "good sense" might be. In the heat of the great industrial union upsurge of the 1930s and 1940s, the communist composer and lyricist Earl Robinson wrote the song "Joe Hill" as an attempt to displace the bourgeois myth of individualism with a myth of collective action mediated by Joe Hill, the IWW organizer. Joe Hill was, in Robinson's phrase, "framed on a murder charge" and executed. But as the song goes, Joe Hill "never died. . . . Wherever workingmen (sic) are out on strike, that's where you'll find Joe Hill." So without using the term, for Gramsci, as for Lukács, the party organization is a mediation between theory and practice, between "man" and history. It must challenge the prevailing common sense at every level: the trajectory of the economy and its effects on class structure; the analysis of the political situation; the articulation of a social and cultural ethics on questions of sexuality, issues of law, education, and artistic representation; the interpretation of history; and the problems of science and technology, both their theoretical implications and their practical applications. In short, unlike the modern social democratic dictum that the limit of political intervention is the material interests of class, defined narrowly as economic and welfare issues, the party organization must be capable of intervening on the widest range of economic, political, and social questions. Prior to any set of specific tactics, its fundamental role is welding together the fragments of the working class through the interpretation and dissemination of the significance of particular, sectoral struggles in relation

to the totality. So the struggle for political and cultural hegemony is a cardinal strategic task during the non-revolutionary period.²⁵

In order for a struggle of this magnitude to be conducted, Gramsci argues, the corps of “intellectuals” must be expanded; but since there are simply not enough traditional intellectuals (and, in any case, one would not want to create an elite in the old sense), raising the level of culture in the “widest” meaning of the term becomes crucial. Here lies the importance of theoretical and philosophical education. Declaring that everyone is a (spontaneous) philosopher and also a politician, Gramsci argues that the task of the “organic” intellectuals is to fuse this spontaneous wisdom with historical materialism. He transforms the concept of elite to mean those who engage in the counter-hegemonic activities of education, propaganda, and theorizing to produce a new “common sense,” and not only as a specialized professional activity. The class develops “organic” intellectuals; some are recruited from the traditional intellectuals who are trained to serve the crown or, after the English and French Revolutions, the bourgeoisie. As the strength of the subalterns, including the proletariat, grows, so too does the number of intellectuals who come over to the movement. But throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, it is clear that Gramsci expects the ranks of organic intellectuals to swell by recruiting a new type of intellectual from the rank and file as a result of the party’s educational and cultural efforts.

IS A RADICAL PARTY POSSIBLE IN THE UNITED STATES?

What are the prospects for the emergence of a “party” in the United States capable of mediating between the existing labor and social movements and history? In order to address this question we need first to make a sober assessment of the specific features of the economic and political situation within the United States and its relation to global capitalism. Within this assessment, we ask what are the conditions of the labor and social movements? Finally, what, in general, is the prevailing “common sense,” both within the movements and in the population as a whole? Then, and only then, can we make organizational proposals.

²⁵ Due in large measure to the legacy of the absolutist states of continental Europe, after the death of Engels Social Democracy tended to insist on the strict separation of the private and the public and to renounce intervention into cultural and social life. This led most of these parties to renounce the dictum that the socialist revolution was about the transformation of economic and political relations and would create a “new” individual whose cultural and social development would be the basis of the “free association of producers.” Perhaps the most articulate statement of the need for the separation is found in Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*.

It is no secret that the US national economy has been seriously weakened over the past quarter century by massive de-industrialization in many of our largest cities and by the emergence, through globalization, of new players in the world economy. Labor-destroying technological change has reduced labor forces in many major industries, while new “tech” knowledge industries have failed to make up for the losses. Reinvestment in US-based industries has declined relatively, even in the crucial energy sector, and global investment by finance capital has increased. Real wages have declined during this period by nearly 25%, and official poverty has increased, but many who are not officially poor struggle to make ends meet. Further, we have experienced a radical restructuring of the labor market: “jobs,” a term which once implied a degree of permanence, have increasingly been replaced by temporary, contingent, and part-time “work.” And while the official level of unemployment hovers around 5%, the hidden joblessness—premature retirements, people forced out of the labor force, job scarcity for first-time job seekers, part-timers counted as full time by official statistics—brings our real rates closer to the double digits of Western Europe.

At a time when global warming threatens life on the planet, US rail and air transportation industries are experiencing a huge crisis, even as the federal government pours hundreds of billions of dollars into the highway program. Among the chief targets of deregulation in the 1980s, airlines have been a net loser in the much-praised free market innovations of the Democrats, who controlled Congress until 1994, as well as in successive Republican administrations. Several airlines have declared bankruptcy, degraded their service, and cancelled contractual mandates for pensions and other benefits, even as they have demanded, and received, substantial wage concessions from unionized workers. Biased without forethought for autos and trucks, federal investment in rail has been reduced to a trickle as railroads attempt to stay afloat by raising ticket fares and freight rates. Skilled rail employees have been laid off, and Amtrak has announced further cuts in service. And the American auto industry, once the envy of the world, has been plunged into near-depression by global price competition, the poor quality of its products, and by short-sighted and self-destructive corporate planning. The transportation industries alone affect a quarter of the economy and millions of jobs. General Motors has announced a 25% cut in jobs over the next three years, and the prospects for Ford are no better.

Meanwhile, domestic and global manufacturers of electronic equipment and computer hardware have merged under stress from relative shrinkage of sales and technological innovation, have engaged in extensive outsourcing,

and have reduced workforces, shattering the classic neo-liberal dismissal of the crisis in intermediate technology industries such as auto, steel, and electrical products. Remember the mantra? “Not to worry. These are rust belt industries. The Sunbelt industries will more than make up for the losses. All displaced workers need is retraining for these hi-tech jobs.” The fact is, with the exception of China and India, which have embarked on a contemporary version of primitive capitalist accumulation by means of what David Harvey terms “dispossession”—a hundred fifty million Chinese have been driven from the countryside into the cities—global capitalism is in a state of stagnation and decline.

But what is the state of the unions and the social movements? How have they responded to the veritable cascading of economic, environmental, and political crises brought about by the daily revelations that, as Marx and Engels remarked in the *Manifesto*, the bourgeoisie can no longer meet the needs of the immense majority of people? (We need not rehearse in detail the appalling levels of US education and health care, let alone the chronic shortage of housing that working people can afford.) How did the Left and the labor movement respond to Hurricane Katrina? Apart from joining in the private relief efforts and criticizing the slow response of the Bush administration, not a public voice of any consequence was raised to point out that privatization of relief services was a symptom of the systematic destruction of Federal civil service in the diplomatic, intelligence, and technical areas and that one of its most competent branches, the Army Corps of Engineers (as well as many state and local engineering departments) had been seriously weakened before the hurricane by the billions of dollars of contracts handed to Halliburton and Bechtel and other private construction firms. Where is the voice that places the blame squarely on capitalism itself, on its evident incapacity to engage in planning beyond the interests of the individual firm? While economist Joseph Stiglitz can show the limits of market ideology, and while Paul Krugman insists that the Bush administration is to blame for countless economic woes, not the least of which is the mounting debt due to war expenditures and balance-of-payments deficits, few analyses link the current situation with the history of neo-liberal economic policy and with the self-interested faith in the market to solve most problems.

How has the left and the labor movement addressed the steady bleeding of good jobs, the incessant corporate demands for wage and benefit cuts to make them profitable, the pattern of concessionary bargaining that has spread like an epidemic throughout the labor movement? Can we say that any significant force within the labor movement has been able to mount a

campaign against concessionary bargaining, where the union becomes the instrument of the employers' program? And when a union of Northwest mechanics dares to withhold their labor rather than grant yet another round of wage and benefit concessions, and, with few exceptions, notably the UAW and UNITE HERE, the rest of the airline unions and the AFL-CIO and its rival federation snub the strike, where are the voices of solidarity that take a public platform to criticize the parochialism of the unions, especially in the airline industry, who cross picket lines and condemn the mechanics for their resistance? While the courageous labor periodical *Labor Notes* has raised these issues, it is only putatively an ideological organ of a fragmented and largely incipient radical wing of organized labor. Since there is no "party" with members broadly distributed in the unions and with a presence in the public sphere to take up these issues, and since there is no intellectual and political force to attempt to weld movements of resistance and to link them to history, we are now confronted with a working class that is ideologically and politically defenseless because bourgeois hegemony—particularly the fatalism that has accompanied the huge shifts in the economy—is virtually uncontested. In this case, and in many over the last quarter century, some workers have identified their interests with those of their "own" corporation, a de facto instance of corporatism. Of course, many are discontented with these alignments but have no vehicle to contest the dominant leadership. Finally, as left-liberals bemoan the absence of political opposition, they remain in thrall to the old "common sense" that the two-party system—and the current electoral swindle—is the only game in town and convince themselves that it is folly to imagine alternatives.

Only those who are in the grip of political myopia would suggest that a party formation is on the immediate agenda. Given the concrete historical circumstances where, for example, a large portion of radical activists are self-described "anarchists," where many in the movements remain in thrall to the "lessons" of the history of international socialism and communism, namely that the party as a form has been discredited, and where the left, broadly conceived, has not seriously debated radical, let alone revolutionary, political theory for a decades, one might propose to form an organization that would attempt to mediate between theory and practice, humans, and history. Concretely, it would, initially, have three principal tasks:

- 1 To bring together those who are already discontented with the current state of things. Movements remain fragmented, locked into single issues, and avoid integrating their specific political foci with a broader vision of a new society. Among the early tasks, then, are the development

of a public presence, largely through the creation of a Left press, and the formation in every large city of groups that dedicate themselves to forming study groups, to intervening, where appropriate, in local struggles, and to contributing to the larger projects such as those outlined below.

2To initiate a broad discussion of the central problems of social and political theory, situated in the actuality of global as well as national situations. We have barely come to terms with the significance of the re-emergence of a Latin American Left, once solemnly buried by ex-radicals who went over to Centrist governments in Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela, among others. How, then, to account for the virtual collapse of European social democracy and American liberalism? Perhaps most important, will the Left take up the critique of liberal democratic institutions advanced by, among others, Benjamin Barber, Grant McConnell, Robert Dahl and Robert Wiebe, each of whom has written persuasively that democracy has become largely an illusion in the United States? If so, what are the prospects for electoralism in what otherwise might be viewed as a stacked deck? And, of course, we need to revisit the question of the state and what Althusser termed its "ideological apparatuses." Is it really possible to reform the state so it becomes an expression and instrument of popular power? Or, as others have claimed, must the state itself be uprooted? The World Social Forum raises crucial issues, among them the project of reinvigorating civil society—the space between the economy and the institutions of political rule. The question is: can we envision radical social change in which the underlying population actually takes hold of the economy and invents forms of coordination that address common problems without forming a series of repressive state apparatuses and without creating a whole new social formation of "organic" intellectuals (including self-described "activists," many of whom are already intellectuals without acknowledging it)?

3To discover what forms a left political organization might take under the concrete, historically-situated circumstances of the American movements. This means revisiting the history of the Left, especially the American Left, as well as developing an adequate theory of our own situation. Issues such as the role of a center and how to insure that funds and other resources are available for education, publications, etc. should be discussed.

A left political organization may or may not be a "mass" party of hundreds of thousands, but from the standpoint of the totality it would articulate the demands of millions. It would seek its membership among the leaders and rank-and-file activists of trade unions, women's organizations, environmental and ecology movements, various factions of the freedom movements for Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and other oppressed peoples, and the anti-war and

global justice movements, and its most important roles might be to link the various forms of discontent experienced by these groups and to begin to make connections between what seem to be a series of unrelated events and sectoral struggles. In liberal democratic societies such as the United States, the organization can expect to win substantial support from the electorate, especially at the local level.

To accomplish these aims, the organization would assemble a small army of intellectuals-- not only academics but also journalists, theoretically-oriented trade unionists and others-- who would engage in the work required by the project of transforming capitalist social formations, including extensive propaganda activities and the sponsorship of schools of popular and advanced political education, and research institutes. A press will be essential for ideological intervention, and the organization would sponsor, through financial or organizational support, a series of independent left periodicals, especially daily and weekly newspapers and journals, all of which would take advantage of the vast potential audiences offered by the Internet.

All of the old arrangements are now in disarray. In some of Europe and much of Latin America, the ideological and political disintegration of the center/left parties has resulted in a revival of a series of Left political formations whose relation to the old Russian question has been partially severed. It is time for the Left in the United States to make a similar break.