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The GUARDIAN:
from Old to New Left

THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

Radicals' Use of History

An SDS Journal of American Radicalism

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For various reasons, several articles from the scheduled "New Left" issue of Radical America have been postponed until next issue. The bulk of the May-June issue will be devoted to new perspectives on American Labor. In all probability the July-August issue will be entirely about the historical origins and development (and future perspectives) of Black Power in America; and the following issue, September-October, will consider Radical Theater.

We welcome into existence the new publications, PAPER TIGER AND CAW. Another new publication soon to appear is the Social History Review, primarily a product of Madison graduate students.

Finally, if you have had delays (or worse trouble) in receiving Radical America, please bear with us. We hope shortly to have available an efficient addressing system.

ERAP: Evolution of the Organizers

Richard Rothstein

SDS set up its Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) two days after the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, with a clear notion of how indigenous democratic organizations of the poor and the unemployed would contribute to major social change in America and the world.

SDS still believed in the possibility of change within the framework of the formally representative institutions of American government. ERAP's goal was to goose those institutions a bit, to set up currents in American political life which would reverse the corruption of established liberal and trade union forces. These forces, with pressure and inspiration from ERAP and other "new insurgencies," would demand that resources be transferred from the cold war arms race to the creation of a decentralized, democratic, interracial welfare state at home.

Those of us who were involved in ERAP at that time have come a long way since. We no longer focus on the arms expenditures of what we then regarded as an "equal blame" cold war --- Vietnam and the Dominican Republic unmasked for us an obvious aggressive economic imperialism. We are now enemies of welfare state capitalism, with little faith or desire that the liberal-labor forces which might father such a system be strengthened vis-a-vis their corporatist and reactionary allies. We view those forces -- and the system they might have espoused -- as being incompatible with a non-interventionist world policy and as no more than a manipulative fraud perpetrated upon the dignity and humane aspirations of the American people.

This last conclusion we owe in large measure to four years of ERAP experience. In a healthy pragmatic style we tested an optimistic hypothesis about

the limits of American pluralism. But after ERAP's first year and a half, when these conclusions began to become clear, we had no organizational structure for formulating and implementing subsequent hypotheses about America and the building of a movement to revolutionize it.

THE FIRST PHASE

The hypothesis of "new insurgencies" on which ERAP was originally based was set out in America and the New Era, a document adopted as policy by the 1963 SDS national convention.

This document assumed many of the arguments of two other 1963 statements. One, The Triple Revolution, was promulgated that winter by a coalition of liberals and radicals including some leaders of SDS. It argued that the "cybernation revolution," resulting in previously unimagined unemployment and leisure time; the "weaponry revolution," which threatened to obliterate the world after wasting resources worth billions of dollars; and the "human rights revolution," encompassing both third-world liberation movements and the domestic civil rights movement were all inter-related. Only through a curtailment of the arms race could funds become available for construction of equalitarian societies at home and abroad; only by recognition of new opportunities presented by automation could America meet the demands of its civil rights movement. Equal opportunity was meaningless in a shrinking job market, the racial problem could not be dealt with unless obsolete economic arrangements were replaced. (Today's "guaranteed annual income" movement is the project of those who still accept the essentials of the Triple Revolution argument.)

The second analysis was contained in the papers of the Nyack Conference, held only a few days after the SDS' adoption of America and the New Era. Ray Brown, an economist now teaching at Swarthmore, predicted that even if new job opportunities were increased at twice the 1963 rate, by 1970 unemployment

would be about 13% -- and astronomically higher for the young and non-white. "None of the present or proposed (Kennedy Administration) programs," Brown concluded, "amounts to more than economic tokenism."¹

America and the New Era added to these analyses a condemnation of the "corporatist" make-up of the Kennedy Administration and of the anti-democratic, managerial solutions which it proposed. SDS described the "dilemma of labor and liberal forces" as a tendency to identify with this managerialism and a consequent loss of the American populist tradition:

Organized liberalism, however, must take at least part of the credit for America's political stalemate. A style of politics which emphasizes cocktail parties and seminars rather than protest marches, local reform movements, and independent bases of power, cannot achieve leverage with respect to an establishment-oriented administration and a fundamentally reactionary Congressional oligarchy.

SDS felt that within these liberal organizations (below the 'middle levels of leadership') there were still people who would support more militant action and more far-reaching solutions than those proposed by the liberal leadership in bed with Kennedy. In part, rank and file sentiment would be galvanized by the obviously worsening economic crisis:

But just as important, the populist impulse in labor and organizations of liberalism can be reinforced by the emergence of new popular movements... It...seems likely that popular upsurge in many communities... could provide a stimulus which would move labor to become an important center of power and leadership... A democratic insurgency could also provide for many middle class people a revived and inspiring vision of a humane society order --- a vision that might stir them out of privatism.

Consequently, one of the chief goals of ERAP was to galvanize the quiescent populists in the ranks of labor and liberalism. The organization of the poor was, at least in part, a political relations maneuver designed to speak to the imagination of stable America. The first two actions of JOIN (Jobs or Income Now), the original ERAP project in Chicago, were to sell apples, a symbol of Depression unemployment. JOIN members, recruited at an Unemployment Compensation center, sold apples first in Chicago's Loop, the center of white collar lower middle class employment; and second, outside a Pete Seeger concert where JOIN could be expected to reach the membership of most of the liberal organizations we were trying to galvanize.

Joe Chabot, the first ERAP organizer in Chicago, spent much of his time speaking to trade unionists and other liberals about JOIN's activity --- fund raising was of course a chief motive, but the political purpose was not overlooked. A JOIN advisory committee, made up largely of leftist trade union staff, was put together. The chief achievement, however, was the commitment of the United Packinghouse Workers union to set up a recruiting office next to a South Side unemployment compensation center while Chabot established an office next to a North Side Center.

Richard Flacks, writing the prospectus for the Chicago ERAP project, expressed this purpose by proposing that

leafletting and sales of apples at plant gates on pay-day will be an effective way of reminding employed workers of threats to their own job security, of arousing interest in JOIN, and of raising money. This effort will be considerably enhanced if local union leaders and shop stewards visibly assist the JOIN workers.

Flacks went on to argue that the JOIN advisory committee

can become a kind of representative body of those forces and groups within the city which can be mobilized for effective political action. Thus the members of this group, although acting as individuals, become centers of initiative within their own organizations and institutions. In this way, a city-wide political movement for full employment and a better Chicago may develop. ...JOIN by itself cannot mobilize sufficient power to achieve social change; only a new alignment of forces in Chicago can bring this about.

Flacks was overly optimistic about the power of JOIN's example to create success for solitary leftists who had been struggling for years to fire their labor unions with a new commitment to popular struggle. Rank and file assistance for plant-gate apple sales never materialized; and the JOIN advisory committee was disbanded after a year -- partly because of lack of interest, but partly also because the new Vietnam peace movement was beginning to absorb some of the advisory committee members' energies.

Nonetheless, speaking truth to liberals remained a key part of the ERAP organizers' program. JOIN organizers never turned down speaking engagements before liberal or church organizations (fund raising was again a key, but not sole, rationale), and made frequent attempts to involve liberals in JOIN's program -- collecting clothing in the suburbs for a JOIN Christmas party, inviting the Fellowship of Reconciliation membership to do a door-to-door survey with JOIN members, accepting the most inefficient part time volunteer arrangements from students who did not yet have a campus movement with which they could become active.

In many cases, the students who did short term tours of duty on ERAP staffs, returned to their campuses to lead university reform and Vietnam protest movements. They were, as a result of their contact with ERAP, reinforced in their populist

impulses. The democratic, "participatory" tone of all ERAP projects has, in this respect, contributed to the emergence of a new popular movement (SNCC veterans returning to campus were, in the same fashion, much more important). But with respect to the labor movement and liberal membership organizations, no such success could be claimed. Before too long, the attitude of most ERAP organizers toward the organizations of labor and the liberal middle class changed from one of hope to one of the deepest hostility and contempt.²



RENT STRIKE IN UPTOWN, 1966 N.Hollander, Chicago Film Co-Op

JOIN TO GROIN

In addition to a missionary effort to liberal-labor forces, an actual achievement of social change was a second goal of early ERAP. America and the New Era made a special point of this:

by concentrating attention on domestic problems, and by demanding the concentration of resources on their solution, the poor and dispossessed of the United States (and every other country) could force a cessation of the arms race. The objective meaning of their demands for goods and social services would be to make continued support for massive military programs untenable.

"The creation of a series of short run social reforms" was one of the priorities to be used by ERAP director Rennie Davis in choosing localities for projects, according to a resolution of the December 1963 SDS National Council.

When it soon became obvious that full employment could not become such a short range reform achieved by ERAP, a new conception of organizing projects began to develop. At first, ERAP organizers defensively described this approach as GROIN -- "garbage removal or income now." But by the end of 1964, the GROIN approach was unanimous -- even the Chicago project changed its name from J.O.I.N. to "JOIN -- Community Union" and moved its office from next to the unemployment center to the poorest of the Chicago northside neighborhoods.

The issues shifted from national full employment to more local issues -- welfare administration, housing conditions, local city housekeeping issues. The original rationale was soon lost, however, as ERAP found local political structures to be so rigid that not even petty reforms, completely unthreatening to the national economic structure and distribution of resources, could be won. A film, The Troublemakers, details the tragic story of the Newark ERAP project's inability even to win a

traffic light at a dangerous intersection. Although ERAP projects developed a facility for winning specific welfare (public aid) grievance cases and for forcing, by rent strike, an occasional landlord to fix up, in all ten ERAP projects only two concessions were gained from the "power structure". In Cleveland, a free lunch program was granted to the children of aid recipients who attended public school; and in Newark, a locally elected war on poverty board was able to appropriate some funds for a recreation center.

ERAP organizers soon began to look at local issues as an opportunity for bitter education rather than for substantive reform which would begin to chip away at the defense budget and reinforce the ERAP organization with a reputation for success. Rennie Davis, in proposing a program for JOIN in October, 1964, stated that an essential ingredient was a demand which would probably be denied by local officials but which those officials clearly could meet if they so desired. Such a demand "will involve people in experiences which develop a new understanding of the society which denies them opportunities and rights; and which will open possibilities for more insurgent activity in the future."

JOIN adopted the suggestion. It took an informal survey of its community and established that a day care center and a public spot-labor hiring agency were the two most cited needs. JOIN proposed these to the local war on poverty office and picketed that office in their behalf. Neither has been granted to this day.

BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER?

The third area of ERAP objectives concerned our relationship to the civil rights movement in which we had all worked. For it had become clear, as a result of the experiences of some SDS leaders within the Northern Student Movement, that the role of white radicals could no longer be as organizers in black communities and in black organizations -- the fact that most ERAP projects were eventually placed in

such communities was not originally intended: the site of the Newark project, for example, was believed to have been inhabited much more by working class whites than was in fact the case.

In the long run, ERAP's purpose grew out of a concern that the objectives of the civil rights movement would be frustrated by working class white reaction. In part, therefore, our goal was to form organizations in white communities which could counter the backlash ("civilizing committees," in the recent words of the NCNP convention). But also in part, SDS had concluded that the job of white radicals was to provide the civil rights movement with white allies who would positively reinforce the power of Negro demands. And what better allies are there than those organized around their own needs and demands, a functional and not merely charitable alliance? The dream of a new interracial Populism was hard to resist.

In an influential paper written in the spring of 1964, An Interracial Movement of the Poor?, Tom Hayden and Carl Wittman surveyed the civil rights movement's lack of substantive achievement and the backlash mood developing in the white community. Hayden and Wittman categorized four types of then current civil rights demands: demands to eliminate segregation (but "the lower class Negro prefers improved schools over integrated schools, and generally improved living conditions over integrated living conditions"); demands which symbolically assert Negro dignity but neither achieve change nor alienate whites very much; demands which are specifically racial, do not achieve very much, and potentially alienate large numbers of whites (such as a demand to replace white workers with black ones in a situation of chronic unemployment); and finally, demands for political and economic changes of substantial benefit to the Negro and white poor.

Hayden and Wittman clearly favored the fourth type, and argued for the organization of poor whites as well as blacks to make such demands:

The alternative to an interracial movement is more likely to be fascism than freedom. We are not convinced that violent conflict between Negroes and lower-class whites will force the American establishment to even make significant concessions, much less dissolve itself. The establishment might merely ignore the trouble and leave it to the local police, or it might use troops to enforce order. In either case, poor Negroes and poor whites will continue to struggle against each other instead of against the power structure that properly deserves their malice.

The feared violence was not, of course, the then unpredicted mass violence of the black community against ghetto institutions, but rather the then common violence of working class whites against Negroes moving into new communities or attending previously all-white schools. The mass organization of whites around issues of their own oppression, ERAP hoped, would help blunt that violence.

And our hopes were that this organization of poor whites would have a second effect in the short run. It was hoped that the organization of poor whites would influence the program of the activist civil rights movement (particularly SNCC, NSM, and to some extent CORE).

It seemed clear to SDS that the civil rights movement was erring in not focussing on economic issues. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom made the connection between racial oppression and national economic crisis explicit. But the targets of SNCC, for example, still remained primarily symbolic: the integration of lunch counters, movie theaters, and so on.

ERAP would make its radical economic analysis of American problems available to the civil rights movement in two forms: first, by focussing attention on economic targets and by organizing the poor around economic issues: unemployment, housing, welfare, poverty. But secondly, it was felt that the organization of the white poor would, of itself be a step forward in the movement's radical consciousness:

an interracial movement of the poor, in which whites too were demanding decent homes and incomes, could not help but demonstrate that civil rights acts which merely outlawed accommodations segregation missed the essential point. Rent strikers' demands could not be met by non-economic integrationist concessions.

It seems clear in retrospect that ERAP played a significant (though not sole, by any means) role in the subsequent redirection of the civil rights movements. In particular, ERAP's emphasis on urban organization around issues of poverty played a part in influencing the program development of CORE and SNCC since 1953. Much more important, of course, was the civil rights movements' own dynamic which, inspired by its failures, created an economically oriented black power movement which swept over and past whatever marginal influence ERAP might have had. But ERAP's role was complementary and, in this respect, should be considered a success.

Not nearly so successful was ERAP's attempt to produce massive white allies in the struggle against white reaction. We clearly demonstrated that racism could be overcome by poor whites genuinely in motion around their own demands. JOIN in Chicago worked closely with black community groups elsewhere in the city, and the indigenous JOIN leadership, while Southern, was clearly committed to the abolition of racism as a political goal. JOIN rent strikes were coordinated with rent strikes in black communities; coordinated demonstrations of black and white welfare recipients occurred more than once at public aid offices.

But the desperately slow pace with which JOIN grew, the inability of ERAP ultimately to commit itself to more than a few white communities, and a national war economy which temporarily reserved poverty for the black masses, all added up to an unreality to the promises of white allies we had earlier made.

By the winter of 1955, ERAP organizers found themselves at a difficult juncture. The three major original purposes of ERAP -- the inspiration of mass protest from the ranks of labor and liberalism; the

achievement of specific, though minor, concessions to social reform; and the addition of significant numbers of poor whites to the ranks of the movement for Negro freedom -- had been abandoned by most ERAP organizers. JOIN organizers, of course, retained the third.

Whether ERAP was justified in concluding after so short a trial that the ranks of labor and liberalism could not be galvanized by the power of our example and that the "power structure" was totally inflexible and unresponsive to demands from below is a question that must remain unanswered. Certainly these are conclusions now shared by most of the "new left."

The more significant question is: what new hypotheses replaced the old in the minds of ERAP organizers, and what effect did these new hypotheses have on the structure of those ERAP projects which continued to exist?

The question is revealingly difficult, because the shift from old premises to new was barely conscious and hardly ever discussed. But by the winter of 1965, if you asked most ERAP organizers what they were about, they would simply have answered "to build a movement."

There would have been little ideological disagreement about what this movement would do, once built. SDS people were rapidly coming to the conclusion that their movement must be such that could end racist exploitation and imperialism, collectivize economic decision making, and democratize and decentralize every political, economic, and social institution in America.

These goals, however, were long run -- and quite appropriately not a problem of concern to ERAP organizers. The short run problems of beginning to build a movement which could some day have the power and skill to organize society in a humane, collective, decentralist and democratic fashion were much more difficult.

The short run problems were these: how to develop leadership in a genuine, non-manipulative fashion; how to balance the movement's needs to create leadership, awaken the country's (or the community's) sense of crisis, polarize by conflict, or create institutions

of local control which give people a living vision of the democracy to be; and how to choose the issues around which any of these tasks could be attempted.

Because ERAP organizers had no idea of how to make such decisions, the ERAP structure dissolved in the spring of 1965. The rationale for dissolution was that of deciding whether a given project should attempt to emphasize rent strikes or leadership training classes, community newspapers or democratic day-care centers, community issues or the war in Vietnam, depended too much on specific local information which organizers from other projects could not hope to have. In fact, however, nobody had any experience in making such decisions even within a project; and not since March, 1965, have any two ERAP organizing staffs sat down together to evaluate and discuss their work.

STRUGGLE AND EXPERIMENTATIONS

It was probably true that a national organization of half a dozen local organizing staffs could not be a forum for working out such difficult problems of movement building. Those local ERAP staffs which continued to survive had to look to the future for the eventual creation of regional unions of organizers which could enable individual projects to deal with these decisions. But in the three years that we have thus far awaited such regional organizations, organizing projects have floundered and achieved, at best, unanticipated success.

One characteristic of projects in the last three years has been a regular re-evaluation and shifting of direction. JOIN, for example, engaged in a rent strike campaign which had the potential of developing new institutions of local democratic control (tenant councils) through tenant-landlord collective bargaining agreements won after the most dramatic conflict. But instead of seeing the implementation of these agreements through, and instead of nurturing the tenant councils into genuine democratic bodies, JOIN organizers adopted new organizing priorities soon after the rent-strike movement had begun. They began to emphasize ideological training for the handful of potential

leaders in JOIN, the creation of a newspaper to increase community consciousness of conflict, and the development of democratic block clubs. The rent strike campaign was abandoned.

Around any given activity, there could also be uncertainty about organizing purposes. Was welfare grievance activity undertaken to maximize the number of grievances actually won for public aid recipients in order to expose (and, in part, obligate) these recipients to a radical, inter-racial, anti-war organization? Or was its purpose to develop a core of recipient leadership which was skilled in the administration of a democratic group or in the processing of grievances for other recipients? Since the development of such an indigenous leadership group could only proceed very slowly, it was in conflict with the first purpose which permitted staff organizers themselves to handle a large number of grievances rapidly and efficiently. A third purpose might be to dramatize actual conflict at welfare offices -- getting in public fights with caseworkers, belittling the offices' authority, picketing and screaming in front of public aid headquarters. Such tactics, through newspaper publicity or the impact it made on recipients who were present, might prepare fertile ground for future organizing and consciousness; but it too might sometimes conflict with the efficient handling of grievances or the quiet development of indigenous recipient leadership.

Because ERAP organizers were generally unclear about the meaning of these alternatives, they often shifted their emphasis from one to another, and then back again. The result was a failure to accomplish any of the possible movement-building purposes; if one was accomplished, it was usually inadvertent.

Lack of clarity about tactical alternatives was only one reason for the constant shift of direction on the part of community organizing projects. Another was frustration. If rent strike and tenant council organizing was difficult and frustrating, it was always possible to develop a political rationale for abandoning it -- it was decided, for example, that the ideological training of potential leadership was more

essential at this time to the building of a movement (which is what we were about) than was the development of conflict-stimulated tenant councils.

A good political analysis could always be made for such a shift -- complete with showing how the shift remedied the historical errors of the movement since the nineteenth century. But soon, frustration with the new direction would give birth to another equally cogent political rationale -- and yet another direction would be embarked upon.

If organizing staffs had been responsible to any group of organizers larger than themselves, such shifts would have been much more difficult. For example, if the JOIN staff had been responsible to the radical movement in Chicago (or earlier, to ERAP) for the development of tenant councils in Uptown, a change in that responsibility would have required a more detached and delaying debate within the Chicago movement (or ERAP). But in the absence of such an organizational context for organizing, political programs could change as quickly and as irresponsibly as the whims of the organizers. And since the success of any program, whether leadership training or rent strike development or massive welfare grievance victories, takes longer than the development of an organizer's frustration, often no program was given a chance to succeed.

Finally, a third reason for the constant shift in organizing priorities was the fact that, in the absence of a broader movement structure from which organizers could take direction, each organizing project had to bear the burden of history on its shoulders. Even when the perception of new political imperatives was not the product of frustration, such perception had to result in new directions, leaving unfinished business behind. A project could not decide that a given task was important, without itself dropping everything else to effect that task. Thus, if JOIN was involved in the training of welfare recipient leadership, and suddenly decided that it was politically important to focus public attention on the arbitrariness of caseworkers, it could not propose that a different organizing project assume responsibility for attention-getting welfare demonstrations while JOIN continued in the quiet task of creating indigenous

leadership. In the absence of any multi-project structure, a division of political labor was inconceivable. Any project had to sacrifice its ongoing activities to whatever was the highest priority of the moment. With each project responsible only to itself, not to focus on the highest priority for the movement as whole was to betray the historical task of building that movement.

A corollary of this problem was the impossibility of experimental work. How could a project experiment with factory organizing, or consumer organizing, or draft resistance organizing in such a context? Experiments produce information for organizers, not necessarily mass movements. But in the absence of a broader structure, with the burden of movement building borne entirely by each project, experiments could not be risked. Each organizer judged his own worth and value by the extent to which he built a section of that movement. If a project experimented with draft resistance failed, and was run out of a community, to whom could the organizers give the benefit of their experience? From whom could they hear, "You are worthy in our eyes; you have done us an invaluable service in providing us with knowledge about the possibility of working-class draft resistance." In the absence of a mandate from such a group, experiments are much too risky.³

CONCLUSION

The ERAP structure was set up to test particular hypotheses about American society. When these hypotheses were abandoned, the structure suffered a similar fate. It probably could not have dealt with the new problems that organizers committed to building a revolutionary movement faced. If structure should follow function, then the demise of ERAP was as it should be.

But new problems demand new forms; movement organizers in many kinds of work -- community organizing, professionals organizing, draft resistance, shop organizing -- have faced similar problems in the last three years. It would be surprising and tragic if new movement structures (probably on a regional basis) were not soon developed to deal with these new problems.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Nyack Conference led directly to the establishment of an organizing project among unemployed Hazard (Ky.) coal miners, a project which affiliated with ERAP when it was created some months later.)
2. In one respect, ERAP projects and rhetoric had a very deep impact on labor and liberal organizations. It is certainly true that the new liberal-labor programs of community development and "community action projects" were influenced very heavily by SDS and ERAP. The rhetoric of participatory democracy (in ERAP, "let the people decide") has transformed the War on Poverty, the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, the Peace Corps, and the curricula of some of the major academic social work schools. ERAP organizers are still quoted and used by VISTA, for example, for highly paid consultant work, which ERAP organizers occasionally undertake both for the money and for the opportunity to reach VISTA volunteers who might, unlike their superiors, take the rhetoric seriously.
 Thus, one of the lasting results of ERAP might have been to provide liberalism with a more sophisticated rhetoric of cooptation. This may not be an insignificant or negative achievement. Historically, one of the dangers for the American ruling class involved in the use of democratic rhetoric is that the ruled sometimes decide to take that rhetoric seriously. The Declaration of Independence, the Versailles Peace Conference, and the Atlantic Charter are but the three most obvious examples.
 Nonetheless, the provision to liberalism of a new rhetoric of cooptation was never a conscious goal of ERAP organizers. The use of ERAP rhetoric by the United Auto Workers elite in the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty is a far cry from the galvanization of the UAW rank and file to mass protest.
3. One crucial problem encountered by ERAP projects with which this paper has not dealt is the problem

Footnote 3 cont.

of dealing with personality differences on organizing stuffs in a humane, firm, and political manner. A structure which the movement will soon have to develop in addition to the structures indicated by this paper is an appropriate technique of criticism and self-criticism.

SDS in the South???

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The GUARDIAN

From Old to New Left

Michael Munk

"The Guardian sees socialism coming our way, urges coexistence with it wherever it now exists, and believes this implies sympathetic understanding and study of its application for our own country's welfare

The socialism we are for, here in our own country, is the socialism still to be planned and proposed by and for the people of the United States. We approve in principle and defend the existence of the socialist societies of the rest of the world. We cannot and do not approve of every act of these societies, but we believe, with Dr. DuBois and Anna Louise Strong, that they are wielding the instrument of socialism well for the good of humanity. . . .

But to label ourselves socialist implies listing the ingredients on the label and the formula for America is still to be compounded "

GUARDIAN Editorial, Oct. 20, 1958

After almost twenty years of continuous weekly publication, the National Guardian is dead. Like Studies on the Left, the immediate cause of death was its staff's inability to agree on a response to the demanding political conditions of the late 1960's, but the similarity ends there. A new Guardian continues, but with its issue of February 10 cuts almost its last remaining link--its format--with the past. With the exception of a few foreign correspondents (notably Wilfred Burchett in Southeast Asia and Anna Louise Strong in Peking) and some non-editorial employees, a wholly new editorial staff and outside contributors search for a new constituency under the slogan: "The duty of a radical newspaper is to build a radical

movement". While remaining "independent," the new Guardian's young staff hopes that constituency will be the New Left (organizationally, SDS and SNCC). "We are movement people acting as journalists", they say.

In one sense, the changes in the Guardian reflect the passing of one generation from the center of radical political activity and the coming of the new, with all the differences in perspectives and style this implies. But this phenomenon raises a whole series of critical issues: Why was the generation with its political roots in the 1930's and 1940's unable to sustain one of its more important institutions? Why was the old Guardian unable to adapt and become as its editor desired, a "bridge between the generations"? Will the New Left want or be able to support the new Guardian? What were the alternative roles and functions of a radical paper in the 1960's on which the Guardian's constituency was unable to agree? The answers to questions such as these ought to clarify whether and under what conditions the American Left might coalesce into a coherent radical movement. Little effort, it seems to me, has been made by either the new Guardian or its former editor, James Aronson, to answer them.² To try, I shall look at the old Guardian's roots and constituency and its response to the New Left.

A group of professional newspapermen, whose main political experience was in the organization of and factional struggles within the American Newspaper Guild (CIO) in the 1930's, returned from World War II, as Aronson writes, "most reluctant to go back to jobs on newspapers where freedom of expression was a slogan, not a fact". As "radicals" their aim, he says, was to create what today might be called a counter institution within their profession, an "antidote" to the daily and weekly press. Their political perspectives generally agreed with those of the ideological center of gravity on the American Left of their time--the Communist party. Thus, they saw Truman's anti-Soviet policies as a "betrayal" of FDR and the New Deal, and they founded the National Guardian³ as an independent supporter of the Henry Wallace Progressive party.

RADICALISM?

In his nation article, Aronson calls the Guardian's founders "radicals" and indeed, refers to it consistently as a "radical" newspaper. But significantly, until he resigned the paper called itself "progressive," referred to its readers as "progressives," and contained explicit political perspectives which were hardly radical. In the Guardian's first issue its founders defined these perspectives as "a continuation and development of the progressive tradition set in our time by FDR, and overwhelmingly supported by the American people in the last four presidential elections." This, of course, was also the outlook of the Progressive Party, which presented itself as a broad people's electoral coalition of unionists, Negroes and middle class "progressives" who wanted to achieve "peace, freedom and abundance" by replacing Truman's political leadership of the capitalist system with that of Wallace. Roosevelt's former vice president would return the nation to New Deal policies of friendship with the Soviet Union, full employment and civil rights.

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But the Guardian did not offer a radical analysis of these policies--like the Progressive Party, it attempted to address the "broad masses" beyond the field of committed radicals, and thereby pulled its punches. Aronson writes that "The Guardian regarded the capitalist system as the major source of the world's problems," but the old Guardian did not publicly do so, except by implication, until well into the 1960's. Indeed, in view of the fact that its entire staff and 99% of its readership were socialists, it is remarkable that the furthest the paper could go ideologically was a plea that socialism "be discussed as a possible alternative and not as a horrid word." The key to this seeming dichotomy, and to the failure of the old Guardian to survive the 1960's, lies in the paper's constituency. The Korean war (the Guardian's opposition to which, Aronson writes, cut its circulation from 55,000 to 22,000 in one year) drove out the last of the liberal readership. Those who remained were predominately Jewish, middle-class radicals, no longer young and with families to support and mortgages to pay. They saw the government murder a man and his wife (the Rosenbergs) very much like themselves, and most had either lost professional jobs in the witchhunt or knew friends who had. And on top of the MacCarthyite repression, the 20th Soviet Party Congress and the revolts in Hungary and Poland rocked their faith in the socialist world (a faith that the Guardian had done much to sustain through articles from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe).

In short, the Guardian constituency of the later 1950's was justifiably scared, confused and politically disoriented, and mostly withdrawn from radical political activity. The Guardian reinforced their readers' introspection by avoiding incisive political commentary, reporting civil liberties developments and attempting to "hold together the Guardian family" almost on a social basis. Its posture, like that of the rest of the American Left in the 1950's was almost entirely defensive.

It was in this context and with this mood that the Guardian was confronted with the beginning of radical activities of a new generation in the early

1960's. The sit-ins, the Freedom rides and anti-HUAC demonstrations were warmly welcomed, both as a sign that the long years of the "silent generation" were over and with the hope that young people would turn to the Guardian for news and guidance. While it was never explicitly stated, I suspect that the paper and its readers saw a new version of the Progressive Party in the making: another attempt to build an electoral coalition of the strengthened civil rights movement, the surviving left-wing unions, and the old grass roots old middle-class progressives. But it soon became evident that most of the new radicals saw the Guardian--sometimes unfairly--as a relic of the past. Too often, they found the Guardian boring. It consisted of slow-moving articles piecing together clips from the daily press, photos and captions in the spirit of the 1930's, "fashion in People's Hungary," health fadism and announcements of the meeting of defense groups like the Sobell Committee, the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, the Emergency Civil Liberties Union.

When I joined the Guardian at the beginning of 1963, its staff was demoralized and the atmosphere tense and oppressive. As Aronson writes, the paper had "almost no turnover in 12 years." And this may be one reason why it had settled into dead routine. There was constant petty sniping at the editor and the paper and personal feuds abounded; entirely absent was the spirit of excitement and camaraderie which characterizes many fictional accounts of radical journalism. Aronson says that most of the original staff left for "mainly financial reasons" but it seemed to me that most of them were, like the Guardian readership, ideologically depressed and somewhat weary of the struggle.

There were efforts of course, to attract writers from the New Left groups and increase campus readership. When these failed to increase circulation, the editor's opinion was not, as he now writes, that "the emergence of a number of small independent local publications in university communities", but rather that "well, these kids don't read anything". In 1963 and 1964 the paper began to speak of itself

as a "bridge between the generations," a meeting place where old and new radicals could unite and work, in some undefined way, for some undefined cause. The Guardian constituency believed that because of their refusal to back majority party candidates, and the evident propensity of the New Left to endorse this view, that there was a potential community of interests, where the young would act on their elders' advice and counsel.

There was a good deal of suspicion of the New Left as well. Its development was watched by the old hands (as carefully as possible considering their lack of direct contact with its leaders) for "anarchist" and "social democratic" tendencies. SDS, at least until its break with the LID, was cited for its "anti-Communist" clauses in its constitution. A major test was always whether the new groups would agree to common action with the Old Left organizations so long ostracized in "respectable" circles. And when it became clear that most young people were not red-baiters but considered the Guardian largely irrelevant, the reaction was similar to an old radical's response to his own children's failure to listen to him--hurt and dismay.

It was finally the April 15, 1965 anti-Vietnam war March on Washington, organized by SDS, that convinced the Guardian constituency that the New Left was a going concern. In introducing a three party article of mine of the New Left that fall, the editor made the first major policy change from the Guardian's original "FDR-New Deal" perspective. "If the ideas of the New Deal were valid for America at the time of the founding of the Guardian", he wrote (in a curious mixture of old and new terminology), "they are inadequate for the world of 1965. It is not enough to call for peace, freedom and abundance. We hold with the movers of the New Left in America that the need of the hour is the development of a movement, radical in content and form, which must set about to shake the foundations of the power structure'.

Aronson writes that he left the paper in April, 1967 because of a profound disagreement with members of the staff on the role and function of a radical

newsweekly . The staff, he says, held that the paper had not achieved influence or stature among the New Left because The Guardian was not "responsive" to its concerns and aspirations (a conclusion with which I would generally agree). He states that he, on the contrary, wanted to encourage young radicals but not, in effect, cater to them, especially since their activity did not make movement and the American left still included a significant number of older radicals who were far from ready to throw in the sponge.

There is, I believe, some truth in the proposition that SNCC and SDS do not comprise the American radical community and in the notion that young people do have something to learn from more experienced radicals. But there is another area wholly ignored by Aronson and by the old Guardian constituency: the Old Left/New Left differences in political socialization, life styles, and understanding of the term "radical" itself. It had always seemed to me that the issues which (in addition to demands for organizational publicity) drew most response from the old Guardian constituency concerned problems the Soviet/Chinese split, the desirability of working for a "lesser evil" electoral candidate, art in the Soviet Union and so forth that are generally irrelevant (at least on the level the Guardian discussed them) to the construction of a radical movement in America. Similarly, the older generation of radicals often had personal commitments which prevented their participation in full time radical activities, direct action, community organizing, etc. Their element was, essentially, middle-class electoral politics. In short, they were motivated in their radicalism by their desire to help liberate other people--not themselves.

The old Guardian avoided the hard ideological questions in bridging the generational gap by maintaining it was a "forum" for all viewpoints on the Left. This meant a constant struggle to publicize the activities of organizations ranging from SANE to Spartacists in an "objective" style--except on such critical Old Left issues as "exclusionism" (of the Communist Party). To this journalistic technique

Aronson attributes the paper's accumulated "respect and prestige" and its ability to survive while sectarian publications failed. But it also had the effect of placing the Guardian outside the movement into a position reflecting its component parts without regard to their strength, substance or role. Was it written for radicals who wished to read about each other? Or did it still try to reach the uncommitted? Its coverage of events outside the Movement was no match for either Ramparts' muckraking or I.F. Stone's "unscrambling the news."

OLD AND THE NEW

The alternate view within the staff, gradually growing younger because of the unwillingness of experienced writers to risk joining the paper, was a much clearer commitment to radical activists, a reversal of the traditional "newspaper first" image. In the end the young staffers won out not because of the substance or clarity of their arguments but more immediately because the largely generational split created difficult inter-personal relationships among the staff. The old constituency was retiring; energy and spirit favored the new. In the case of the Guardian, at least, the differences between the Old and the New Left were resolved on a level of style rather than ideology.

Now that the break with the past has come, the new Guardian faces the same difficult challenge: to develop a coherent perspective on its role as a radical paper. The same challenge found the old Guardian inadequate for its time. The signs are that the new staff favors "mucho Vietnams" abroad and "mucho Detroits" at home as tactics for the Movement. Its news stories seek reactions from SNCC and SDS in contrast to the ACPFB or the ECLC. Opinion and commentary dominate hard news in its sixteen pages. Will it be genuinely "independent" with a clear perspective that consistently informs its readers, or will it serve, as the old Guardian did, as a "forum" for its favorite constituencies? An important clue to the Guardian's future may lie in the simple truism that the paper's greatest

relevance and viability for the political necessities of the time came during its close relationship to the Progressive Party, when it fought for the maintenance of a radical alternative to the Establishment despite the decision of the CP to retreat back into the Democratic Party in the early 1950's. In those years the Guardian spoke passionately and launched its great crusades which, whatever their relevance to the present day, carried with them the impact of deep conviction and moral vision.

FOOTNOTES

1. "National" has been chopped from its nameplate.
2. "Memories and Convictions", The Nation (Feb. 5, 1968, p. 178-178).
3. Its name was chosen as conscious gesture to grass-roots American radicalism: it was derived from Oscar Ameringer's American Guardian, founded in 1914 as the Oklahoma Leader and suspended only six years earlier (in 1942) on Ameringer's retirement. The earlier National Guardian's frequently folksy style and substantial rural "old timer" readership reflected this strain.

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Socialist Opposition to World War I

Charles Leinenweber

In April, 1917, just one day after the United States declared war on Germany, the Socialist party met in emergency convention in St. Louis. It was the first Socialist convention since 1912. Five years had passed, years of declining membership and vote, of disillusionment with the possibilities for success. In his keynote address to the St. Louis convention, party leader Morris Hillquit charged Socialists with a "growing laxity in our own organization," and said it was a "fatal blunder" not to have held a convention in so long.¹

But if Socialists had grown lethargic in the past, now they had the opportunity to recoup. The vast majority of Americans, they believed, were opposed to the declaration of war. Yet the Socialists remained the only organized force willing and able to carry on the struggle against the war. Thus, they faced two tasks: First, to maintain their principled opposition to the war, and second, to rally the anti-war elements of the nation behind the Socialist banner. With respect to the first task, the Socialists were eminently successful. With respect to the second, they were also successful, at least on their own terms. As James Weinstein has shown, 1917 proved to be the year of greatest Socialist electoral success--which included, for the first time, heavy Socialist voting in the major Eastern cities.²

With renewed vigor, the Socialists at the St. Louis convention adopted an anti-war manifesto that remains the most eloquent monument to American socialism. Drafted by Hillquit and Algernon Lee, of the Center, and Charles Ruthenberg, of the Left, it won by a large majority. Sent out on referendum to the party membership, it won by 21,000 to 350 votes over a pro-war statement.³ The manifesto began,

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The Socialist Party of the United States in the present grave crisis reaffirms its allegiance to the principle of internationalism and working class solidarity the world over, and proclaims its unalterable opposition to the war just declared by the government of the United States...

It continued with statements of opposition to class rule and "sham national patriotism," and urged workers to "refuse to support their governments" in war. After analyzing causes of the war, the manifesto set forth three formulas which more than any other section aroused the government to fury:

We brand the declaration of war by our government as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world. In all modern history there has been no war more unjustifiable than the war in which we are about to engage.

No greater dishonor has ever been forced upon a people than that which the capitalist class is forcing upon this nation against its will.

The manifesto concluded with a call for "an even more vigorous prosecution of the class struggle" during war-time, and pledged Socialists to a seven-point program for action. This program included continuous opposition to the war through all means within their power, unyielding opposition to conscription, and mass action to end the war.⁴

The St. Louis manifesto represented the Socialist party ideal. There did exist backsliding here and there during the war, for a number of reasons. For example, Germany's continued attacks on Russia after the revolution aroused doubts among many Socialists. But despite doubts and equivocation, the party as a whole fought hard against the war and against the most serious repression they ever encountered.

For the Left Wing, this was at least consistent with its internationalist perspective. Questions of war were never prominent in the party until the outbreak in Europe. However, the party had given

considerable attention to the question of free vs. restricted immigration, and a prolonged debate on internationalism revolved about it. The Left wing developed a strongly internationalist position, for free immigration. The Right wing, on the other hand, took a nationalist position with very strong overtones of nativism. They favored heavy restrictions on immigration, and this effectively became the public position of the Socialist party. The Center favored some restrictions, but its spokesmen were for the most part free from the nativistic attitudes of the Right.

After the outbreak of war in Europe, the reformists, Center and Right, for the most part shed their nationalist perspectives. There still remained vestiges, of course, sometimes important. But the question of immigration was pretty much dropped --no doubt partly because it was a moot point during the war years--and this had a liberating effect on the mentality of the reformists. However inconsistent their newly-developed internationalism was with their past, it did not have to be inconsistent with what they believed for the present.

The Left wing was suspicious of the reformists' entrance into the arena of internationalism, and considered them imposters. Most historians of American socialism feel the same way, and since reformists dominated the party, they ask: How is it possible to account for the strong anti-war position of the Socialist party? It was a reformist party, with reformist leadership, yet did not betray socialist principles like its European counterparts.

HISTORIANS' ERROR

The answers to this question vary. Perhaps the most challenging is the idea that it was really the Left wing that, directly or indirectly, charted the course of the Socialist party during the war. One of the best historians of American socialism, Theodore Draper, suggests this.

To Draper, the Left wing might have stood alone in its opposition to the war if "the government had not flung its legal dragnet so wide..." The

reformist leadership adopted a radical posture, he believes, because they were frightened by the possibility that the Left wing would otherwise win control of the party. In order to head-off Left wing influence, Hillquit and his allies split the Left wing delegation to St. Louis with a militant resolution. Thus they "made it impossible for the Left Wing to emerge at the convention as a fully developed, independent political force." The fact that reformist Socialists were not to be spared government repression was an accident. Draper writes,

A head-on collision with the government was not at all what the Hillquit-Berger team had intended. The resolution did call for anti-war demonstrations, "unyielding opposition" to conscription, and other militant measures. But some of those who voted for the resolution were more interested in inner-party maneuvering than in obstructing the war effort...

A similar point of view is held by Julius Faulk.⁵

Several objections can be raised to this kind of analysis. Most obvious of all, it is patently unfair to the party's reformists. Take for example, Victor Berger, leading Right wing municipal socialist, head of the Milwaukee Social Democratic Party, and very often used by historians as the model of opportunism. It is probably true that Berger, and some of his fellow reformists, would have preferred a milder anti-war resolution. But what is far more important is how well Berger stood up against government repression, how well he defended the party's anti-war position by his own activities. For someone "more interested in inner-party maneuvering than in obstructing the war effort" he paid heavily. By the end of the war, Berger had been convicted under the Espionage Act of obstructing the draft, and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment. He was freed pending appeal, on a one million dollar bond. The judge who tried the case, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, said after the trial,

It was my great displeasure to give Berger twenty years at Fort Leavenworth. I regret it

exceedingly because I believe that the laws of this country should have enabled me to have Berger lined up against a wall and shot.⁶

Moreover, a multitude of other indictments had been returned against him--for which he still faced conviction--good for fifteen hundred years imprisonment. During the Harding administration, Oscar Ameringer reports, Berger was offered a deal. If he ran for Senator against LaFollette--which he had done once before--the Administration would, 1) see that his twenty year sentence was thrown out by the Supreme Court, 2) quash all pending indictments, and 3) lift the million dollar bond. Moreover, they would finance his campaign. They wanted to split LaFollette's vote, to enable the Republican candidate to win. Berger refused.⁷

Clearly, the anti-war activity of men such as Berger cannot be explained simply by their fear of the Left wing. It isn't as if, as Draper says, the government cast its net too widely and caught some barely committed reformists by mistake. If that were the case, these reformists could have evaded the net with ease.

Another possible objection to Draper's analysis--perhaps the most important--is that it fails to present an accurate picture of the Socialist Left wing. First of all, Draper focuses almost exclusively upon those elements that were soon to comprise the American communist movement. It is important to realize that once well developed, they differed in many important respects from the traditional Left wing. The traditional Left was a loose aggregate of syndicalistic industrial socialists, orthodox Marxists, and revolutionary populists. Their most representative publication was the International Socialist Review, which had a circulation of some 40,000. The English language press of the Bolshevik Left showed much less diversity, and was limited to a very small circulation. Secondly, Draper in some ways treats the embryonic Bolshevik Left as if it were fully developed. If this were the case, then there would have been tremendous differences on the

war between them and the reformists--and indeed, the Left wing as a whole. After the Bolshevik Revolution these differences did emerge. But they were not yet Bolsheviks, and on the question of the war remained basically indistinguishable from the traditional Left, of which they were still a part, and even the party's reformists. Quite naturally, they thought their position ought to be different, and spared no opportunity to criticize the reformists. However, their contribution to the party's anti-war position must be measured independently of this criticism, on its own merits. To do this, it is necessary to take a closer look at what the Left wing wrote.

THE RECORD OF THE LEFT WING

War in Europe took the Left wing by surprise. But they soon made up for it, devoting the bulk of space in their magazines and journals to news and analysis of the war. The Left wing was quick to sense the betrayal of international socialism by the European parties--much quicker than the reformists, who adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Since the reformists were long identified with a spirit of nationalism--in particular, in their demands for restricting immigration, and also in their dealings with the International--many Left wingers saw their equivocation as evidence of continuing nationalism. At times they felt certain the reformists would follow the German example, and support the U.S. if it entered the war. Gradually, certain Left wing writers --most prominently, Louis Boudin and Louis Fraina-- began to emphasize their internationalism as opposed to the reformists' nationalism. Certainly, there were differences. The Left wing, for example, continued to assert that "The workingman has no nation." The reformists disagreed strongly.

Despite this, however, Left wing attitudes toward the war differed very little from the reformists'. Their analyses--which appeared in Left wing publications such as The New Review, The Masses, and the International Socialist Review--showed great variety and uncertainty. The war was seen variously as a

traders' war, a militarists' war, a munitions manufacturers' war, a war between feudalism and capitalism, between democracy and autocracy, and so forth. There were even a few theories of war as an inherent disposition of men (but not women), and war as the nature of mankind. Altogether, there were surprisingly few well thoughtout analyses. Prominent among those that were, were articles by European revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and the ultra-leftist, Anton Pannekoek.

Among the major Left wing writers on the war was Louis Fraina. Fraina was destined to become the leading American Bolshevik during the formative years of the communist movement, but at this time he was something of a syndicalist--a bias shared by perhaps the majority of Left wing Socialists. He was the leading figure on The New Review, without question the best revolutionary journal of the period. Fraina's orthodox attitudes toward the war, combined with an uncompromising hostility toward the reformists who shared them, are indicative of the confusion among Left wingers.

Throughout the period that Fraina wrote for the New Review--up to its demise, in June, 1916--he never believed that the war would result in a socialist revolution. When Italy entered the war he predicted a "new and mightier Capitalism" for its efforts. "Out of the murk and murder and treachery of the war will issue a new Italy,--democratic, progressive, powerful." For England, he predicted as "one of the momentous social phenomena of the war," the triumph of "laborism." He felt, "there is nothing revolutionary about the workers of England." Fraina saw State Socialism as the major outcome of the war; collectivization for the war effort was progressive and irreversable.⁸ Strange as it may seem, these were precisely the views held by most reformists, the very Socialists for whom Fraina had nothing but disdain.

Fraina's hostility toward reformists went back a long way. As a youth in 1909, he had joined the Socialist party, but left it, Theodore Draper says, "because it was not radical enough for him."⁹

After returning and joining the New Review in 1914, one of his first tasks was to write a eulogy to Daniel DeLeon. In it, he attacked Morris Hillquit and Victor Berger for having "introduced into our movement all the vices and none of the virtues of the German Social Democracy." In January, 1915, several months after the outbreak of war, he denounced the "Nationalistic Socialism" of Hillquit and the reformists, and warned,

Militarism is one of its dangers. Socialism is against militarism. On this point there can be no equivocation. Socialism is international or it is not.

Again, in March, 1915, Fraina stated in another attack on Hillquit,

Clearly, emphatically, Socialism must adopt the criterion: against all wars because in all wars national interests are the decisive factors.

This criterion implies anti-nationalism and Socialist advocacy of complete disarmament.

But by June, 1915, Fraina himself had succumbed to the temptations of nationalism. Now fearful of "German world dominion," he wrote,

In spite of Capitalism's use of militarism as an instrument, militarism is not an indispensable and normal phase of Capitalism. Germany's victory would impose a new and mightier militarism upon the world, drain its economic and political resources and crush its libertarian aspirations...

The threat was more than economic, it was cultural. "Germanism" was a "system of civilization" that emphasized the physical, the material and the militarist. As opposed to this, the Allies were the "unconscious and imperfect" representatives of the human, the spiritual and the individualist. Therefore, Fraina believed, "The neutral nations cannot allow, must not allow Germany to win. Germany must be beaten if it takes the whole world to do it..." Elsewhere he urged that the Allies organize and "fully utilize the

resources of the world," to bring "the defeat of the Austro-German aggressors...in sight."¹⁰

Fraina was not alone in his fear of Germany. Several prominent Left wing spokesmen sided openly with the Allies. Max Eastman, editor of The Masses, wrote in October, 1914,

Not only is our heart with invaded France, but our reason also dictates that the Kaiser and his military machine must be whipped back into Prussia and smashed. Let us have no premature peace makers...¹¹

Eastman further called Germany "the most abominable monster of Europe." Floyd Dell, also on the staff of The Masses, and Robert Rives La Monte, an associate editor of The Law Review, expressed similar views. Two of the most prolific Left wing writers on the war--William English Walling and Frank Bohn--supported the Allies from the beginning and ultimately favored U.S. involvement. Walling was one of the best theoreticians in American Socialism, and well worth reading today. Frank Bohn was a syndicalist, and an associate editor of the International Socialist Review.

It should be pointed out that virtually all American Socialists were in their heart of hearts for an Allied victory--including Eugene Debs, Morris Hillquit, and also IWW leader Bill Haywood. Few stated this publicly although occasionally, as with Fraina, the sentiment became obvious. The major dilemma was how to be against both the Kaiser and the European democracies in equal measure. At first the evil of the Kaiser was theoretically counter-balanced by that of the Tzar. But this didn't work well because Russia seemed so weak militarily. The dilemma could have been resolved, perhaps, had the Left wing developed a consistent theory of the war as imperialist. However, if their analyses were consistent at all, they tended toward a theory of nationalism as the cause. On this score Germany came out well ahead of the rest, and thus was seen as an immensely greater evil.

There was further confusion among the Left wing concerning the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1916. Two key writers for The Masses--Max Eastman and John Reed--supported him for President. With tortured logic, Eastman criticized the party for nominating a candidate, Allan Benson, especially out-of-touch with the proletariat, then voted for him while endorsing Wilson. Years later he admitted, "I was concealing the fact that I could not make up my mind."¹² Even the International Socialist Review, so unswervingly revolutionary, was taken in by Wilson. In August, 1916, the Review printed an unsigned editorial attacking the Milwaukee Leader--Victor Berger's reformist newspaper--for its criticisms of Wilson. In characteristic straight-from-the-shoulder prose, the editorial charged,

To howl suspicions of militarism against a president who has kept the working class of America out of war during a hair-trigger period is a species of treachery to the working class that does no good.¹³

Following Wilson's victory, Frank Bohn in The Masses lashed out at Socialists who still had the "old-fashioned impossible attitude...of hating every radical because 'he steals our thunder'..."¹⁴

In their concrete proposals for peace, the Left wing Socialists had little positive to offer. In September, 1915, Fraina suggested, "It is our task to prepare for peace, not to bring peace," and denounced the current Socialist party program as "apologetic, incompetent and pro-German."¹⁵ In fact, the Socialist peace program was virtually identical to that of the Russian Bolsheviks. It called for no indemnities, national self-determination for countries under foreign rule, no military or naval appropriations, and no exportation of arms. Concerning the last point, Left wing theoretician Louis Boudin went so far as to oppose any stoppage of arms shipments through government action or strikes in munitions factories, because it would affect only the allies.¹⁶

LEFT VS. RIGHT?

The major positive suggestion of the Left wing for peace was not revolutionary at all. Most, including Boudin, Fraina and Eastman, favored a League of Nations plan, as did the reformists. Boudin was especially enthusiastic about a world democratic federation, as an alternative to nationalism. Such plans were based upon the idea either that war was a remnant of feudalism, or a product of nationalism, based upon capitalist development only up to a certain stage. Thus, capitalist nations could co-exist peacefully in a world federation, especially if compelled by the working class.

On the problem of how to oppose U.S. involvement in the war, the Left wing was for the most part elusive and vague. When Wilson began his preparedness campaign, unlike many of the reformists they refused to give credence to the idea. Beyond this, however, they had little concrete to say. Throughout the Left wing writings there runs the threat of "mass action," but this seemed more rhetorical than real until the Bolshevik Revolution gave it substance. Alexandra Kollantay wrote of turning the war into a civil war, but as a Russian Bolshevik she was referring to European conditions. The idea of the "general strike" was only rarely mentioned.

Louis Waldman tells of a Left wing program for action, introduced at a Socialist meeting in Manhattan, just one month before the St. Louis emergency convention. Leon Trotsky and Louis Fraina appeared there as leaders of the Left wing, and introduced a resolution calling upon Socialists to,

resist all efforts at recruiting by means of mass meetings, street demonstrations and educational propaganda, and by other means, in accordance with Socialist principles and tactics.

They also called for strikes against industrial conscription.¹⁷

By the time of the St. Louis convention, however, Left wing members had forgotten what they learned from

Trotsky. There, they opposed the Hillquit-Lee-Ruthenberg majority resolution--which contained all the essentials of the Trotsky-Fraina program--and introduced their own. It was drafted by Boudin who, along with Fraina, had also met with Trotsky and others to develop a revolutionary perspective on the war. Yet, from their own perspective, the Left wing resolution was in every way inferior to the one adopted. In contrast to the majority resolution, its prose was unbelievably turgid, it was far milder in tone, and actually devoid of a program for action. The Left wing manifesto began,

In this grave hour in the history of this country, we, the representatives of the Socialist Party of the United States, in special Convention assembled, deem it our duty to place before the membership of the Socialist Party and the working class of America a succinct statement of our position on the questions involved, and to outline a program of action which we believe to be in the interest of workers of this country to follow.

After going into the causes of the war and warning of a permanent military establishment "all to the great detriment of the democratic institutions of this country and the moral and material interests of its toiling masses," the manifesto concluded,

All of these reasons lead us to the conclusion that we must oppose this war with all the powers of our command.

That was their program for action.¹⁸

The convention rejected the Boudin resolution overwhelmingly. Less than half the Left wing delegates voted for it. It could only have been written to distinguish the revolutionaries from the reformists, but on the question of war, at this time, that was impossible. So far, their differences were only superficial.

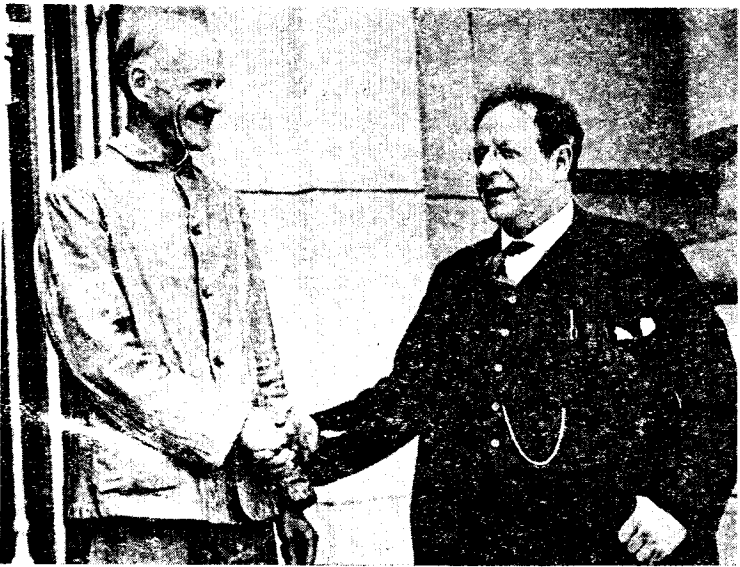
When the party adopted its St. Louis manifesto, most well-known Socialists defected. Few in absolute numbers, the majority of defectors were simply

rejoining the Progressive intellectuals, who had marched en masse into the war camp. There were, however, several important Left wing defectors, who generally get less attention from socialist historians. Already mentioned were William English Walling and Frank Bohn, two of the most prolific Left wing writers on the war, both editors of the New Review. Joining them were Henry Slobodin and Robert Rives La Monte. Slobodin, along with Eugene Debs and Louis Boudin, was a leader of the combination industrial-political socialism tendency of the Left wing, and an associate editor of the International Socialist Review. La Monte was an editor of The New Review. The reformist party leadership had been afraid to send him as an organizer to Lawrence during the famous strike, because he was too radical. During the critical 1917 Hillquit-for-Mayor campaign in New York City--which attracted the attention of the press all across the country--these men joined with Right wing defectors in opposing Hillquit. They issued a public statement to the press, calling Hillquit a "champion of German Kultur" and accusing him of "giving needless aid and comfort to the enemies of democracy the world over..." With respect to Russia and the revolution, they said the Russian people "are not in favor of a German peace. Yet Hillquit takes the position of the anarchist-Socialist Lenine, and opposes the genuine socialism of Kerensky." In a letter to the New York Times, Frank Bohn called Hillquit supporters "weeping cowards" and "common traitors to civilization."¹⁹

Of course, these Left wing defectors were exceptions--just as were the Right. The vast majority of Socialists shaped up as soon as the U.S. entered the war, threw their weight behind the St. Louis manifesto, and prepared for the difficult struggle ahead. It is impossible to tabulate all the arrests and convictions of Socialists for obstructing the war effort; it went on at all levels. Morris Hillquit, who acted as attorney for many radicals prosecuted by the federal government, writes,

It is estimated that during the war about two thousand persons were convicted under the Espionage Law and sentenced to terms of imprisonment aggregating twenty-five thousand years. In many if not most of these convictions the St. Louis proclamation played a large and fatal part.²⁰

The question remains, if the Left wing alone neither directly nor indirectly motivated the Socialist party to take such a strong anti-war position, how did it come about?



Debs, the Socialist Party candidate for 1920, at the gate of Atlanta Federal prison, greeting his vice-presidential running mate, Seymour V. Stedman.

WHY WAS THE SOCIALIST PARTY STRONG?

Daniel Bell, in his essay, claims that there is some truth to the charge that a high proportion of Germans (for Germany) and Jews (against Russia) in the party accounted for much of the opposition.²¹ Bell, however, gets his information from Charles Edward Russell, a Right wing defector and the only Socialist

to have publicly supported preparedness. Russell is a highly unreliable source. In fact, the party's German language daily, the Volkszeitung, was very hostile toward the German SPD and supported Karl Liebknecht. The party's German language federation featured Kollantay and Trotsky as speakers. As far as the Jews' hostility toward Russia is concerned, by the time the St. Louis convention met the Tzar had already been overthrown, and all Socialists supported the new Russia.

More convincing is a point of view shared by most historians of American socialism, including Bell, David Shannon, Nathan Fine, and Julius Faulk.²² They suggest that had the party been more closely tied to the trade union movement, it would have been more interested in simply protecting the gains and institutions of the workers for the duration of the war. The party probably would have compromised its anti-war principles. This did happen to the AFL, which had been moderately anti-war until shortly before America's entrance, and then pro-war. And of course, it happened to the European socialist parties, which were based on the trade unions. To bolster this viewpoint, several of the historians cite the fact that most important Socialist trade unions left the party after the U.S. declared war, and joined with Gompers in supporting it.

It may be true that many Socialist trade unionists left, although probably as many stayed. More important, however, is the fact that in the only two areas where the party based itself on trade union support, with strong ties developed over the years, it remained anti-war. These areas were Milwaukee, Wisconsin, home of Victor Berger, and Reading, Pennsylvania. The trade unions in these places were heavily German, at least in tradition. But the leader of the Reading Socialists, James Maurer, was also president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor. During the war, Maurer--who was famous for his militant anti-war activities--was re-elected president by a three-to-one majority, despite the fact that Gompers sent up a crew to make sure he was defeated.²³

Another related point socialist historians make is that unlike the European parties, the American Socialist party had few political strongholds, and therefore nothing to conserve. The fact that it had not gained success and responsibility permitted it the luxury of opposing the war without suffering really serious consequences. The problem with this analysis is that it views the American Socialist party purely from the standpoint of the mass European parties. While it is true the Socialist party was small, it did have a lot to conserve. First of all, the party had an extensive press with circulation in the millions, which was almost totally destroyed by government repression. Second, the party was an organization attempting both to maintain itself and to grow. It at least shared these characteristics with the European parties, despite its relatively small membership of some 80 thousand. When the authorities began to raid and plunder national and local headquarters, Socialists were outraged because the party, which they had built over the years, meant a great deal to them. Moreover, they saw their party as a very important force against the war - likely, the only organization which would stand and fight in the face of repression. They even expected to make gains during the war. Thus, from their own standpoint, they had a lot to protect and conserve--but they were unwilling to do it by backing down. Finally, they had their own lives to protect. The dangers they faced--as related by Max Eastman, Oscar Ameringer, James Maurer and others--cannot be exaggerated.

Several historians argue that the geographical distance of American Socialists from the war in Europe enabled them to oppose it. Rather like isolationists, they were not so troubled by an immediate military threat to their nation as were the European socialists. It need only be pointed out, first of all, that the same argument could be used for precisely the opposite point--that distance enabled American Socialists to support the war since they were untouched by its devastation. Secondly, this argument could not account for the opposition of the Russian Bolsheviks, both before and after they took power, or the various minority socialist groups, or conversely, for the support that British socialists gave the war.

Several other points are perhaps more helpful in understanding why the Socialist party was so strongly anti-war.

First of all, as several historians have suggested, American Socialists were helped considerably by the anti-war sentiment in the nation. By the time the U.S. entered, the nature of the war in all its ghoulishness had pretty well been revealed. In this sense it was easier to oppose than at the beginning when, in the midst of popular frenzy and romantic ideas, the European parties had to deal with it.

Second, American Socialists were able to draw from the experience of Karl Liebknecht and the German minority. Distressed by the failure of so many European socialists to oppose the war, Liebknecht appeared as a shining example to them. The entire Socialist press treated him like a hero, and his writings were widely read. He was the model when the real test finally came. Furthermore, American Socialists were uplifted by the resurgence of anti-war sentiment among their European comrades.

Third, the St. Louis manifesto itself was drafted immediately after the U.S. declared war. Morris Hillquit says that war had come so suddenly, the convention delegates "had no time for calm deliberation." They were horrified, and the freshness of their horror is revealed in the manifesto. It should also be noted that at the time of the St. Louis convention, Socialists were accustomed to relatively free speech.²⁴ It was several months before the government began its campaign of repression. A few historians have suggested that had the Socialists known what was in store for them, they would not have been so militantly anti-war. This is extremely dubious since first of all they anticipated at least some restrictions on civil liberties, and secondly, once they found out what was in store, they still refused to give in.

This list could be extended, but I want to end here with one major point. None of the various reasons that historians suggest for Socialist opposition to the war, are in any sense "causes." Lack of ties

to trade unions, for example, did not "cause" Socialists to oppose the war, any more than it caused previously anti-war Progressives to support it. We are dealing here with real socialists, real people--not creatures who are merely pushed and pulled around by conditions and events, but play a large role in making them. Politics are only partly a reflection of material conditions; they are also a creation of intellect. It is this latter dimension of human agency--to paraphrase E. P. Thompson--that must never be forgotten. Whatever the size of the Socialist party, whatever its political strongholds and ties to the trade unions, whatever the conflicts between various political tendencies, the following conclusion should be kept uppermost in our minds: The political position of American Socialists during the war, their forthright opposition to it, was a product most of all of a truly heroic effort of the will, of self-enlightenment against overwhelming odds. It serves as a profound example of the elevation of consciousness through human effort.

FOOTNOTES

1. American Socialist, April 14, 1917.
2. James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), pp. 119-176, is the best and most comprehensive analysis of Socialist anti-war activity. This article, written prior to the appearance of Weinstein's book, reaches many of the same conclusions but draws from entirely different source materials.
3. David Shannon is mistaken when he says 8,000 voted for the pro-war resolution, giving the anti-war manifesto a three-to-one majority. The majority was sixty-to-one. See James Oneal and G. A. Werner, American Communism (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1947), p. 35n for an accounting of the vote.
4. American Socialist, April 21, 1917.
5. Theodore Draper, The Roots of American Communism (New York: The Viking Press, 1963 ed.), pp. 92-95. Julius Faulk, "The Origins of the American Communist Movement," New International, Fall, 1955, pp. 165-166.

6. Lilian Symes and Travers Clement, Rebel America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), p. 305.
7. Oscar Ameringer, If You Don't Weaken (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1940), pp. 297-298.
8. Louis Fraina, The New Review, June, 1915, pp. 80-82; August, 1915, pp. 153-154.
9. Theodore Draper, op. cit., p. 62.
10. Louis Fraina, The New Review, July, 1914, p. 392n; The New Review, January, 1915, p. 17; March, 1915, p. 141; June, 1915, p. 54.
11. Max Eastman, The Masses, October, 1914, p. 5.
12. Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Living (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 25.
13. International Socialist Review, 1916, p. 71.
14. Frank Bohn, The Masses, January, 1917, p. 16.
15. Louis Fraina, The New Review, September, 1915, p. 233.
16. Louis Boudin, The New Review, May, 1915, p. 3; July, 1915, p. 123.
17. Louis Waldman, Labor Lawyer (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1944), pp. 67-68.
18. American Socialist, April 21, 1917.
19. The New York Times, October 29, 1917, p. 4; Bohn letter November 3, 1917, p. 14.
20. Morris Hillquit, Loose Leaves from a Busy Life (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1934), p. 167.
21. Daniel Bell, "Marxian Socialism in the United States," in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, Socialism and American Life, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 313-314.
22. Daniel Bell, op. cit., p. 314; David Shannon, The Socialist Party of America (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1955), p. 98; Nathan Fine, Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928 (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1928), pp. 307-309; Julius Faulk, op. cit., pp. 165-167.
23. James Hudson Maurer, It Can Be Done (New York: The Rand School Press, 1938), pp. 228-230.
24. Morris Hillquit, op. cit., pp. 167-168.

On the Radicals' Use of History

John Strawn

James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1957)

Paul Buhle and James Weinstein, "The Meaning of Debsian Socialism." Radical America, Volume II, Number 1, Jan.-Feb. 1968. pp. 44-59

James Weinstein's The Decline of Socialism in America is, in the opinion of William Appleman Williams, "a provocative call to new thought and more relevant action..." presumably among American radicals. Weinstein, while modestly avoiding making Williams' claim his own, nonetheless responded to Paul Buhle's review of The Decline... on the grounds of that claim, which Buhle also accepts. Both assume as a rule of thumb that there are lessons waiting for discovery in the socialist past, and that these lessons can be a prod to "new thought and more relevant action." Their exchange, consequently, rooted in a common understanding of historical meaning, bypasses several important weaknesses of Weinstein's interpretation of socialist political history, while raising a serious question about radical historiography. These weaknesses, I think, deserve some attention. The commentary which follows tries to attend to them. It is in no sense a thorough going critique, but rather a limited judgement based in part on a reading of Weinstein's book, and in part on Buhle and Weinstein's public conversation. The commentary shares in the limitations of all criticism, since it offers no alternative interpretation. But if the criticisms are valid, and the research they suggest actually relevant, then another interpretation may be possible.

I. ON WEINSTEIN'S EXPLANATION OF THE PARTY SPLITS

The central failing of The Decline... is its reliance on a chronicle of internal party tensions as an explanatory key to the party splits. Except for references to Great Events--the Russian Revolution, the War, etc.--Weinstein rests his analysis almost exclusively upon written records of debates within the party. The impression thereby given is that the crisis in the Socialist Party was self-generated--that it was, in fact, the conscious creation of the Left wing. This explanation requires careful scrutiny, both intrinsically and for what it reveals about radical history.

The Left wing (so the argument goes) really emerged as a clear challenge to the moderate leadership of the party only in 1919. "The movement for a split in the Socialist Party," Weinstein writes, "... did not develop in the manner, or for the reasons, that it did in Europe. It sprang forth suddenly, and with little or no internal impetus, in the spring of 1919." The split was generated by a Left less critical of American realities than imitative of Russian events, which tried to impose a Bolshevik political style on the Socialist Party. Using Bolshevik rhetoric to criticize the old leadership--mainly Berger and Hillquit--, the Left initiated a massive crise de conscience in the party, assuming that the Revolution--meaning the Left--would be aided by the purgative splits which would follow. When the splits in the party did occur, they were thus based less on the live options facing socialists than upon analytical distortions irresponsibly imposed on existent America by the Left. Consequently rendered impotent by severe disunity, American socialism entered a period of decline from which, regardless of the shape it assumed, it could never emerge.

Taken in vacuo, this explanation contains a necessary germ of truth--namely, that the Left wing, perhaps more conscious of Bolshevik history than its own predicament, accepted the validity of a split in the party. But to make that necessary germ of truth the sufficient condition for the disease ignores the nature of the animal. As everywhere in history, truth

is not so one dimensional and accessible.

Three assumptions lie behind the explanation of the splits in the party summarized here: first, it assumes that the mature Socialist Party, left to its established mode of existence, was capable of moving steadily toward a new society in the United States; second, it assumes that the leadership of the American Socialist Party differed measurably in the content of its political thought and potential relevance from "its European counterparts"; and, finally, it assumes that the moderate leadership of the party, unlike the Left wing, was critically attuned to American realities. Ignoring for a moment the normative implications of each assumption, it is necessary to point out that the thesis supplied by these assumptions must demonstrate rather than assume their truth; each assumption, that is, must be tested. Otherwise, the explanation exists at base without the support of evidence. There are several parcels of evidence--several "questions --directly relevant to the failure of American socialism which suggest the direction subsequent examinations might take. And though they are of themselves without disputative value--i.e., they "prove" nothing--, they do suggest that the history of American socialism has not been exhaustively studied.

It is critically important to know, in regard to the first assumption, for example, the role of the Socialist Party's leadership in the wave of strikes beginning in 1919. Were men like Victor Berger as interested in the strikes as in electoral politics? Is there any evidence to say, as Weinstein does, that "the party might have been able to change its perspective on the long range prospect of electoral work, had it not been torn apart by the splits of 1919?" (Radical America, p. 55) If there is no evidence to support the assertion that "the party might have been able to change," then the historian may only conclude that the party either could or would not rethink its position on electoral activity. This, correlated with a knowledge in depth of the composition of the strikes, the demands of the strikers (e.g., were they "revolutionary" or, as Weinstein suggests, purely bread and butter?), is clearly aligned to the question of the party splits. If, again by example, the strikes had a

revolutionary content, and the moderate leadership did not respond to them, then that would certainly contribute to the climate leading to the splits. Finally, since it is true that the party membership shifted in composition from native to foreign born, it would certainly be important to know whether or not the composition of the strikes reflected the ratio of that shift.

The test for the second assumption underlying Weinstein's explanation is comparative: "In Europe, where the unions were closely tied to the Party," Weinstein writes,

bureaucratic self-interest in holding onto their organizations was stronger than the principles of internationalism. In the United States many Socialists in top union offices chose to remain "effective" by staying with their unions. But the unions, as the IWW learned, had to support the War or be destroyed. Such trade union Socialists dropped out of the Party and became patriots, but the Party, because of its autonomy, was saved from the fate of its European counterparts. It was able to oppose the war and agitate among the rank and file despite the loss of high ranking union officials. (My emphasis J.S.)

This statement contains very little accurate information; if the "fate" of the European socialists was their inability to "oppose the war and to agitate among the rank and file..." then the statement is false. In France, Germany and England, major anti-war voices emerged, ranging from the moderate "Wilsonians" to the Zimmerwaldians. In France by 1918, the Minority led by Jean Longuet gained control of the French Socialist Party (SFIO); their German counterparts organized in the German Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). I think that, in terms of their overall political perspective, it was these minority socialists who were the European counterparts of Hillquit and Berger. Certainly all of these socialists agreed that, while the Bolshevik Revolution was of major importance, it didn't require them to rethink the political tactics they had worked

out prior to WWI and the collapse of the Second International. And like the American Socialists, the European minority--the "Reconstructors" of the Second International, the men of the Two and 1/2 International --were harried by a vociferous left whose question was, as Raymond Lefebvre put it to Jean Longuet: "You were with us in the old struggle (i.e., against the war): why do you desert us in the new one?"

The "new struggle" Lefebvre passionately spoke of was the World Revolution, the great driving belief of the youthful Left which appeared everywhere imminent in 1919. Informed by a new and vigorous internationalism, the Left hurled itself against the old and "false" internationalism of the Second International. For the post-war Left, internationalism did not mean occasional congresses of national sections to discuss socialist principles; it did not mean continued adherence to "national, parliamentary" action; it did not mean rhetorical commitment to revolution "in a thousand years." What it did mean, rather, was a radical break with traditional socialist tactics--with parliamentary action, with an International incapable of transcending national loyalties, with a mechanical orthodoxy ossified in its conceptual purity. It was a militance filled with rage, an intense anger directed against both the capitalists who were everywhere held responsible for the First World War, and the Socialists who had acquiesced in Capitalism's outrage.

A CRITICAL DIFFERENCE

But the new International's challenge was neither simple moral outrage nor a flight of heroic fantasy. The condition for the Left's existence was, in an immediate sense, the failure of the Second International, despite its valiant pre-war rhetoric, to prevent WWI. But the conceptions which informed the Left after the war set them off from the "Old Guard" socialists. Everybody claimed to be a "true internationalist" during the war, from social patriots like Walling and Russell in America to courageous opponents of the war like Berger and Hillquit. Yet the content of that espoused internationalism after the war was central; it was no longer the relatively simple question of opposing the war, regardless of the difficulty

and courage inherent in that opposition, that certified the sincerity of socialists. It was now compelling to assure--at least as a negative implication of revolution--that no more wars would be fought in the future. The Left intended to gain that assurance by making the World Revolution. And if that intention was chimerical, if it was later to void itself of authenticity, it was not because it was dishonest, nor because nobody believed it.

Weinstein, by failing to investigate the content of American socialist internationalism, by making the equation opposition to WWI equals internationalism equals socialist purity, attributes to the Old Guard a character it never had. Part of the reason for this lies in Weinstein's previous discoveries, which are valid and immensely important--namely, that American socialism did not collapse in 1912, but rather continued as a force in American history until it was decimated by the splits of 1919. For if the party had gained in strength during the war, led by the militantly anti-war Old Guard, does it not make sense to assume that their leadership was valid and attuned to the aspirations of the working class? Unfortunately, it does not. The composition of the party, as previously indicated, had shifted to the foreign born, utterly disenfranchised workers in the cities. Perhaps because they understood, from their experience in European socialist anti-militarism, that the war was rooted in the conflict of competing capitalisms, or perhaps for other reasons, they responded to the Old Guard's opposition to the war. But, since the only tactic conceptually available to the Old Guard was electoral activity, the disenfranchised immigrants had no vehicle for real expression of their opposition to the war. At best, the position of the Old Guard reinforced their opposition to capitalism; yet at the same time it made no serious attempt to engage them in activity that could seriously challenge the economic basis they assumed was responsible for leading America into war. The promise of that activity appeared with the emergence of a Left wing aware of the failures of the Second International and committed to immediate revolutionary changes in American society. The Old Guard understood that, and

in a move worthy of the most Bolshevized of parties, precipitously expelled the Left from the Socialist Party.

* * * * *

II. ON RADICAL HISTORY

And from all of this, then, what do we conclude? Well...nothing, really, about the American Socialist Party, but perhaps something about the way we know our history. Weinstein has written the history of American socialism the way it has always been written --from the top down. There is very little sense of the passions which moved men, or of the reality they perceived and struggled against. The assumption that history can--and should--be written this way is the methodological core of most contemporary history, and Weinstein shares it with men whose political commitments diverge fundamentally from his own. One must ask, then, whether or not The Decline of Radicalism in America is history. The answer, I think, is that it is not. But in order to explain why it is not, one must say what radical history is. I do not claim to know, but I have some thoughts on what radical history should be. Directly relevant to my thoughts on radical history is my understanding of its inspiration: why, in other words, do we as radicals now insist on radical history? An attempt to answer that question is the theme of what follows:

In an essay in the recently published The Dissenting Academy entitled "Historical Past and Existential Present," Staughton Lynd remarks that "(d)espite the alleged antihistoricism of the New Left, the need for a collective past is felt with particular keenness today by young people." This "need for a collective past" issues, apparently, from the torment of hating the Behemoth. Young people (and more consciously, young radicals) are aware of the totality of American repression, of the saturation of American society with the energy of corporate capitalism. The totality of repression stretches beyond the existential present to subsume the past in its all encompassing grip. As radicals we are therefore not only

confronted by the pivotal assumption of the present--that whatever is wrong with America, given that such is admitted, will be resolved by the beneficence of an increasingly altruistic and malleable capitalism--but also by a masquerade of perpetual perfection disguised as our history. And out of a rejection of the former flows an irresistible demand for a thorough uprooting of the latter.

There are really two ideas fused in the consciousness demanding a radical history. One can lead, perhaps, to what it intends; the other probably cannot. It is important to distinguish them, for as long as they remain together the whole drive toward radical history is trapped by the conceptions it wants to deny. One idea is expressed by Paul Buhle, in his introductory remark about Weinstein's The Decline of Socialism in America:

As American radicals young and old grapple for organizational forms and tactics to best combat imperialism and capitalism in this country, they often forget that the battle for ideas has been fought before, that at least seventy years of success and failure in the revolutionary movement have demonstrated lessons that must be learned. (My emphasis J. S.)

Buhle's contention that there are lessons in the past severely delimits the parameters of radical history, implicitly making radicals its subject matter. The history of radicals is important, if for no other reason than that their very existence is an embarrassment to the myth of America's past. But they are no more relevant to understanding the formation of contemporary consciousness than the corporate elite, Black people, or the Vietnamese. The notion of lessons in the past is a disguised search for heroes who have challenged the totality of American society; it objectifies that futile search by making it necessary for the present, by posting its efficacy. Aside from demonstrating the existence of a radical tradition in America--specifically, an intellectual radical tradition--it does nothing to challenge fundamentally the

supreme methodology of contemporary history.

ELITIST HISTORICGRAPHY?

Staughton Lynd proposes a logical corollary to Buhle's notion (with which, however, Buhle has no connection) when he suggests that the real job of historians is to project "alternative scenarios for the future." His suggestion deserves wide attention and, hopefully, subsequent outrage. Lynd wonders whether or not historians might, as historians, involve themselves in the specific outcome of the Vietnam War:

Where the historian could be helpful, in my opinion, is not by deeper but still inconclusive research into the past, but by projecting alternative scenarios for the future. Considerable experience is available as to the behavior of revolutionary nationalist movements under varying environmental pressures. (sic!) Without presuming to predict the future, historians might help American policy makers be more flexible and imaginative by, so to speak, prophesying a variety of outcomes to the present bloodbath. (p. 104; my emphasis)

I have also made the assumption that the historian's business with the future is not to predict but to envision, to say (as Howard Zinn has put it) not what will be but what can be. The past is ransacked, not for its own sake, but as a source of alternative models of what the future might become. (p. 107)

Here the notion of history from the top down receives its clearest expression. And like the idea of radical history, it stems from the overwhelming impotence we all feel as radicals. After all, why should Herman Kahn have all the fun? Lynd is willing to sacrifice even the hope for radical history on the chopping block of relevance. But whose relevance? For if what Lynd prescribes for historians is accepted,

history is obsolete; Lynd, in fact, accepts as much when he insists that only contemporary history can be sensibly written.

The dilemma Lynd perceives and tentatively deals with is central to a radical history. Lynd is grappling with Marx, who, "like Hegel and Ranke," Lynd writes,

believed that ethical goals need not be imposed on history since they were imminent in it. He too, despite a youthful emphasis on man as historical creator, believed that "freedom is the recognition of necessity."

Accordingly, for someone like myself (Lynd continues) who was more and more committed to the thesis that the professor of history should also be a historical protagonist, a complex confrontation with Marxist economic determinism was inevitable. (p. 98)

From his "inevitable confrontation" with Marx, Lynd derived the belief that man makes his own history in the person of the revolutionary. "The revolutionary transforms not only an oppressive society but the laws of development of that oppressive society." Lenin, Fidel, Mao--these are the makers of history: "...any revolution...requires a decision by individual human beings to begin to determine their own destinies at whatever cost." The weight of that decision, accordingly, gives substance to the movement of events. But now we have come full cycle, from the lessons of the past to the decisions of the present, which are identical; both derive from the anguish of our predicament.

Is, then, radical history possible? Probably, but not as therapy, and certainly not as a chronicle of the mechanism of decision, either as input or output. One can agree with Lynd that men make decisions, that they act consciously, and that they do so within a social environment. The historian, however, does not test decisions, nor is he acting via the abstractions of his craft when he makes

them himself. The central task for radical history is to determine the relationship between conscious activity and actual event, between the conjunctures of social forces and the consciousness of the men they affect.

It is thus the second informing idea of radical history that holds its promise. The history we now know is largely false, not because it has no permanence, but because it serves as a wedge between us as active men and our own humanity. It either wraps us in the suffocating cloak of individuality cut off from purpose or past, or hides from us the concrete in a shroud of abstractions.

This is not, obviously, a catalogue of intentions, nor an index of the tasks of radical history. It assumes only that, as radicals, we do not accede to the workings of contemporary America. Whether or not we will succeed in being radicals in America, as historians or anything else, remains the plane on which we stand, and on which we decide.

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