POLICY IMPACT
AND POLITICAL CHANGE
IN AMERICA
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Contents

Preface vii

Chapter 1 Introduction: The Problem of Thinking About Political Change 1

PART 1 SYSTEM IN CRISIS: SEEING IT CLEARLY
Chapter 2 The Structure of Authority in the United States 21
Chapter 3 The Current Crisis and Our Real Alternatives 41
Chapter 4 The Limits of Reform 65

PART 2 CONSCIOUSNESS CHANGE: SEEING DIFFERENTLY
Chapter 5 Ideology and Consciousness: The Culture Trap 91
Chapter 6 Consciousness Change: Problem and Process 113
Chapter 7 Connections to the Structure of Power and the Process of Change in the Total System 137

PART 3 POLITICAL CHANGE: SEEING AND BECOMING
Chapter 8 Contemporary Prescriptions: The Legacies of Marx 163
Chapter 9 Contemporary Prescriptions: A Search of Viable Alternatives 189
Chapter 10 Political Change: Preconditions and Prospects 209

Bibliographical Essay 231
Index 243
self-preservational activity of the supposedly revolutionary organizations, and never enter whatever real revolutionary process may exist or develop.

Nevertheless, these organizations continue to play a part in the process of change in the United States, if only a potential one. They are the leading carriers of the Marxist tradition and, if or when numbers of Americans turn in that direction for help in achieving fundamental change, they may be reinvigorated in numbers if not in capabilities. The Communist Party, with all its rigidities and other limitations, is still the largest entity in the United States that is apparently committed to the principle of fundamental change by revolutionary action if necessary. As such, it cannot help but remain a factor—though hardly one that has anything positive to teach us about the theory of change in the United States.

Post-New Left Marxist Formations and Applications

The amorphous, atheoretical movement of the 1960s known as the New Left has, for the most part, evaporated into liberal politics and lifestyles or withdrawn into a variety of individualist “solutions” to the problems that were felt rather than understood in that period. Its demise stands as an excellent illustration of what happens to people who, for whatever reason, fail to develop a comprehensive theoretical understanding or conceptual framework into which they can fit their experiences and render them personally meaningful. But some segments of the New Left have sought such deeper understanding, and in turn some of these have turned to Marx as a source. Younger and untied to the past, they have been freer to go directly to Marx rather than Marxists for their guidance. Consistent with the design of our continuum, they vary in the rigidity of both organization form and adherence to Marx’s own principles (as opposed to idiosyncratic adaptations or modifications). We shall consider a relatively rigid illustration, the National Caucus of Labor Committees, and a much looser version, the collection of local groups and national celebrities that once went under the name of the New American Movement.

The National Caucus of Labor Committees (NCLC) was formed in 1968, as the New Left was beginning to break up. In contrast to other small socialist groups at that time, it has continued to grow into a centrally-managed organization with many local units across the country. It is more flexible and less centrally dominated than the older Marxist groups, and conceives itself as locked in struggle with them for hegemony among American leftist organizations. It is based on the most serious return to Marx himself, one that sinks Marx appropriately back into the German critical-philosophy tradition in order to understand him on his own terms. It draws heavily on a specialized interpretation of Marx’s principles and methods by its founder, L. Marcus, whose writings transcend critical theory and other Marxists completely and amount to a major scholarly and revolutionary reinterpretation. All that is necessary and appropriate to informed action to bring about socialism is available from the proper (i.e., the NCLC’s own intensely theoretical) interpretation of Marx himself. Thus the leap is made from Marx to the American present, and the NCLC uses the intervening past only for illustrations of the failures of previous socialist leaderships to follow Marx’s real teachings.

The NCLC, comprehensively following Marx, sets the problem of consciousness change at the center of their intricate theory of political change. For the few intellectuals and potential mass leaders who make up the organization, the problem is dealt with by making the organization into an intensive self- and mutual-education effort. Extensive regular communication and repeated conferences of the entire membership serve the twin purposes of spurring the consciousness-change process and providing at least some opportunity for participation in governing the organization.

The problem of mass consciousness change is solved by a version of the mass strike route discussed earlier. The NCLC is of course committed to the traditional working class as the vehicle of change. But it conceptualizes this class in class-for-itself terms, i.e., as a class conscious of what is shared among its components and determined to seize power and reconstruct the society. The “class” has not yet reached this stage, to be sure, but that is exactly the task of the knowledgeable vanguard—to provide the guidance necessary to unite the unemployed, workers, minorities, etc., into one coherent fighting force conscious of its own strength.

Beyond the early stages of propagandizing and creating some illustrative organizational forms, however, there is little that even the best socialists can do. What dramatically escalates their opportunities is the
breakdown of the economic system, which the NCLC (not surprisingly) sees as imminent. Inflation, fiscal crises, and a massive depression are anticipated in the immediate future, and with it the prospect of spontaneous mass strikes and other protest demonstrations. With effective and timely intervention, these mass strikes can be redirected from merely economic issues toward questions about who can and should manage the society, and toward what ends. The crisis will so undermine workers' commitments to the present consciousness that the spontaneous experiences and sudden awakening to a sense of power and purpose that occur during the mass strikes, effectively developed by the NCLC, will result in the beginnings of significant consciousness change. Socialism will then be possible. The state will serve as the vehicle of reconstructing both social institutions and people so as to move decisively toward the only viable future for humanity.

As may be obvious, the NCLC has captured some of the key strengths of Marx. But it also reflects some of his problems, and poses other dilemmas of its own making; as a result, it embodies a vast potential that may or may not be fulfilled. To begin with, it requires great intellect and total devotion to master Marx in his own terms. When a small number of young Americans set off on the road to consciousness change in this organized fashion, they can hardly help but soon feel distant from the great bulk of their fellow countrymen. A sense of achievement, of moral as well as intellectual superiority, can be a natural result. This can articulate with the vanguard-emphasis in Marx himself to cause the group to develop a self-confidence which may appear to be arrogance. It may be right on occasion but it always has ample intellectual agility to explain events in terms consistent with its theory. In any event, it assumes the right and responsibility to act in the name of the entire working class, or even of humanity itself, and demand that others follow for those reasons.

Convinced by its own analysis the NCLC does not doubt the immediacy or depth of the coming world depression and the prospect of prompt descent into fascism. It turns apocalyptic as well as vanguardist, and may run the risk of either adventurism or self-delusion. All those to the right are either fascists, incipient fascists, or their willing or unwilling collaborators. In either case, the NCLC is justified in taking whatever action appears both necessary within its theory and practically workable, on behalf of the cause of world humanity. This may take the form of destruction of other leftist organizations if they stand in the way or appear to be objectively collaborating with incipient fascists. The principle of left hegemony applies also, creating not only justification for, but the obligation to eliminate such obstacles to NCLC service as the leadership of the working class in the revolutionary movement.

Standing in sharp contrast to the well-organized and highly theoretical NCLC is a loose collection of local organizations and itinerant celebrities who once used the title of the New American Movement. This association of ex-New Left and newly radicalized middle-class people sought a theoretical basis for understanding the American social order and how change might be accomplished, and found it in a sketchy Marxism linked to their own local organizing efforts. There is at present no real organization to this movement, and only the loosest shared tendencies and beliefs that can be analyzed. They are all, however, committed to some form of Marxist analysis, the goal of socialism, and the recognition that this will probably require revolution. For our purposes of critical evaluation, we may take a recent book by Michael Lerner, one of the prominent figures in the New American Movement, as expressing some of the central tendencies of this collection of groups and individuals. Entitled The New Socialist Revolution: An Introduction to its Theory and Strategy, it is at least one of the few works that seek to deal comprehensively with the process of change in the United States from a generally Marxist perspective.

But it also seems clear that the veneer of Marxism is very thin indeed. Lerner's Marxism is neither philosophical nor theoretical. Rather, it is a gloss upon standard New Left rhetoric and existing practice which serves two primary purposes. First, it enables the blame for all that is deplorable about our current conditions to be placed on a single source, capitalism, and then it provides a basis for trying to incorporate the working class in the change-seeking movement. Its essence is a kind of something-for-everybody grab-bag. Not only does it accept as equally valid all the conflicting claims and programs of various change-seekers, but it also endorses a process of change in which all of these groups are invited to "do their own thing." Out of this, Lerner asserts, there will emerge a mass socialist party. Like the movement that inspired it, the book is a kind of case study of how Americans settle for the most superficial version of Marxism— but nevertheless believe them-
selves to have reached the heights of sophisticated analysis. It picks up key Marxist phrases that are profoundly meaningful in context, for example, drains them of their meaning, and then blithely applies them to the most trivial aspects of American politics, all the while acting as if some momentous insight has just been achieved.

Lerner's work emphasizes the necessity of consciousness change, and notes that the Charles Reich version is improbable and unsatisfactory. But it becomes apparent, when his meaning is explored, that he actually has very little more in mind than achieving understanding of capitalism and its workings as an unsatisfactory system. To begin with, Lerner argues that all necessary insight can be developed through empirical research (p. xli). He stresses that "the claims made in this book are meant to be empirical, not empty and rhetorical"—as if the latter were the only alternative. At no point does he suggest other than empirical-descriptive insights as the content of the "new consciousness."

Lerner also stresses "class-wide solidarity." But he means only a grand coalition of everybody and every group seeking change. Repeatedly, he views each and every group or claim as equally justified and equally a contribution to the process of change. And yet it is this very multiplicity of conflicting claims that has kept the working class divided throughout American history. It has never been more seriously divided against itself than right now, but Lerner's Marxist prescription is for continued emphasis on what divides people rather than what unites them. The "class" that he talks about has no real existence in shared consciousness of its members; it is no more than a sociological abstraction.

In reviewing the contributions to change to be made by the various "constituency groups," Lerner sees the necessity for at least important segments of the working class to be in the lead. But he does not foresee either economic or social crisis, relying instead on less fundamental social forces to prepare workers for "radical consciousness." Nevertheless, a fifteen-year timetable for revolution is contemplated. Perhaps fortunately, however, there are already "millions of people in this country who increasingly realize that their only hope lies in socialist revolution." Where these people are, and how they have concealed their commitment so effectively, is left unexplained. But Lerner is confident that they will soon constitute themselves into a mass socialist party.

It seems clear that, again like the New American Movement from which it emerged, this book reflects a flat, empirical image of the process of change. Accepting every group and tactic just as they are, regardless of the many conflicts between them that promise only mutual cancellation, Lerner proceeds to endorse whatever these groups now happen to be doing, for various reasons, in search of change. He certainly deserves classification among the most flexible applications of Marxism that have ever been made. But the book should be popular on the left—because it is so completely within the existing consciousness, and because it so fully endorses every group and tactic now in vogue, and promises socialist revolution in fifteen years. Just as surely, however, it is likely to have little if any constructive impact.

Independent and Scholarly Marxism

Applications of Marx in the United States are, perhaps fortunately, not limited to organized groups. A variety of independents and scholars have employed Marxist frameworks to interpret and prescribe for American society, and thus served to carry this tradition forward into American discourse. To be sure, one of the problems of the New Left in the 1960s was that there was so little in the way of a viable Marxist tradition available as an alternative to atheoretical protest. But probably, given the disillusionments of the 1930s and the waves of red-baiting of the post-World War II years, the wonder is that there were any individuals willing to teach and write in a Marxist perspective.

In the United States, the scholarly side of the Marxist tradition has been preserved chiefly in the disciplines of history and economics. Historians such as Eugene Genovese and William A. Williams have interpreted the American past in Marxist terms, offering a view of our development that stands in contrast to the self-congratulatory official versions. Williams in particular has directly challenged American students to come to grips with Marx as analyst and humanist. Consistent with their disciplinary focus, however, none of these important contributions have sought to explore problems of change.

Marxist economists have repeatedly analyzed the workings of the American economic system through use of the technical tools of Marx's economics. Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy argued in their Monopoly Capital that the American economy generated too much surplus wealth, and that the country was therefore obliged to continually expand sales