

## REVOLUTION SACRED AND PROFANE

We laboriously explore our difficulties to discover: what seemed new ways are soon distilled to the old, and we are to be rudely shouldered into channels long since laid down. The literary dream and the individual synthesis, freshly conceived and romantically inspired, may illumine the edges and enrich the interstices of social life—may even, at rare times, provide genesis and sustenance for a new regrouping of the whole. But for the most part, lumbering, structured society will not yield itself to the eager Promethean hand nor readily consent to be remolded in the name and in the image of each passing God. We may, if we like, conjure up our goals with an artist's hand; but that is the pattern of random proposal, of offering a varied platter to the real arbiters of history, heedless of the need to search out the possibilities in the given world as the foundation-stone of rational political enterprise.

The sign and warrant of political wisdom (and in its inversion, the brand-mark of naivete) is the recognition of the resistant, recalcitrant, limiting nature of human personality and social institutions. I am not, it is perhaps politic to add, entirely ignorant of the modern viewpoint in social psychology, with its brash plasticity-complex. But it seems to make sense to insist that while much in that approach is important, affording a quickened awareness and a more accurate notion of methodology and its postulates, nevertheless serious people will not confuse the latter with the hardy truths won in the course of human experience, however poorly they may be formulated. For *action*—that kind, at least, which intervenes in events, which deals significantly with the primary stuff of social change, with classes and parties and governments—is always shaped and molded by the character of the institutions which it ventures to manipulate. The politically effective form of this impingement is the *limitation of alternatives*, or, put another way, the *presentation of historical choices*. The projected history of any given period may be infinitely various in the realm of fancy, but the real paths along which events may run are few and none too far apart. The philosopher may, if he is brilliant, have a viewpoint pretty much his own, but the philosopher-in-action must soon choose sides or retire. He cannot enter politics on his own terms; he must make his peace with that force, in effective conflict, with whose fate he has bound himself and his ideals.

The historical choice is the choice which is offered. It is the choice which may and can be made because (1) large social forces are or can be readily mobilized in the direction desired; (2) solutions

are offered to the felt problems of key groups; (3) continuity, though not identity, with the traditions, ideals, and habit patterns of the common man is maintained and (4) the program and its instruments are *responsible*, in the sense of a full acceptance of consequences without dissolution, at critical periods, into one or another more vigorous trend. There are, at any time, only a few different movements which can satisfy these conditions. They represent, at that time, the given historical alternatives, which devour between them those who attempt to find a median path. These alternatives tend, in practice, to polarize around absolutes, so that those who value action as intervention must lay aside, in choosing within the context of action, undue affection for the neat formulation and special interpretation. That is why the artist is not a politician; and it is what we mean when we say that a movement has become mature, has reached its level, has found its natural allies. It is a sure corollary of this conception that fundamental social change is gradual, always effectively braked by the moderating forces which great human agencies bring with them as they search out the unknown in action.

It may seem strange to read these words, so replete with conservative connotations, in the pages of a socialist magazine. But closer reflection will teach us, I believe, that this is as it should be. For socialism today is more and more becoming the receptacle, protagonist and defender of the fundamental social ties as well as the highest ideals of our civilization. In the old days, socialists could lay their every stress on the changes, the overturns, which they wished to institute, leaving to the politically conservative factions the task of defending the principles, traditions, and institutions of social order. This division of function seemed fitting and proper. For it was natural to believe that those who defended a specific *status quo*, the existing political and economic order of things, should find it easy and useful to cling to the banner and extol the merits of the very principle of order and social stability itself. And so it was, for a long period. For although some branches of international socialism, nearing and reaching the heights of power, began to experience the difficulties which responsibility for the nation as a whole entails, most of the movement maintained its role of oppositional minority and social solvent.

But this timeless allocation of function, the conservative defender and radical innovator, has been robbed of its meaning by the complexity of the new relationships. No longer can we say that those who are defending particular structures shield as well the basic relations of mutual aid and fellowship which lie at the root of society. The value of the *status quo* as the crisis deepens and endures becomes,

for those in power, defined in the realistic, self-conscious terms of naked rule and privilege. Despairing as they must of the viability of the traditional social forms and procedures for the maintenance of their power, the conservative elements become institutionally radical. They seize upon any course, any movement which will carry them on its shoulders and promise relief to fear-ridden bank accounts. In this way they effectively and finally divorce their special interests from the general interest and welfare of the community at large. For the new instrumentalities to which they turn are reckless of consequences beyond the capture of power, and are therefore subversive of the moral bonds and accustomed forms of social order.

Hence are the roles reversed. Socialists find themselves defending large areas of American culture (the principles of constitutionalism, Christian fellowship, individual liberty in conscience and politics and economics—to only begin the list) at precisely the time when most other groups, who support those presently in power, are in unashamed flight from those principles. The socialist program, in means as well as in ends, is keyed to those precepts and therefore becomes, on an historical plane, the culturally conservative and defensive movement.

Not without difficulties, not smoothly or free of racking, enervating problems. The law of the limitation of alternatives is unrelenting. The choice we make within the bounds it sets is hardly academic, or even transient; to act upon such a choice is to define the structure, the operative ideals, the habits, the alliances, in a word, the *character* of our movement. The classic decision which each generation of socialists has had to make is that between reformist social democracy and apocalyptic bolshevism. These are the polar trends. Both have deep roots in man's nature, both can intervene effectively in events—each to its own part, each in its own way. The characters of these two movements, as we have come to know them after long acquaintance, seem to exhaust the field of significant choice which the complex interweaving and interdependence of historical structures will allow us. There is no middle course which will not soon be drawn into the vortex of one or the other of the historical alternatives.

It is true, of course, that neither movement has been able to attain its professed goals. That is why many socialists, anxious to learn new lessons, have sought to delineate a new road which would be neither reformist nor bolshevist. Yet, while that research is commendable, insofar as it sharpens our understanding of tactics and strategy, it is unwise to hide our faces from the fact that ultimately we must take sides in the real struggle, which will deal harshly with our special programmatic qualifications. What, in action, will be the basic character of our movement? Will it be attuned to an es-

essentially gradualist philosophy, with conservative precepts, with a due respect for those institutions already formed which protect and nourish our values and ideals? Or shall we build an altogether different movement, sustaining and ruled by radically different personalities, which will reach down into the emotional depths of society for the instruments of its nihilistic venture? Intelligence must make this choice self-consciously, for it sets the framework of all action. It is only in the light of the basic road we have chosen that a discussion of new procedures and wiser strategy can make sense.

Socialists who have come to know the spiritual roots of what they stand for will recognize immediately their affinity with the gradualist course. For while European socialism went down to defeat stumbling over its own errors and poor leadership, these movements still remained basically socialist and progressive. And since they were not the sole arbiters of history, it may be questioned whether even the wisest strategy would have led to victory. Bolshevism, on the other hand, transformed itself into an utterly alien instrument, turning toward quite different sources of strength and power, and embodying in explicit form all the merely potential culturally nihilistic elements in oppositional socialism. The social-democratic road leans on those cultural roots which we seek to defend; bolshevism is avowedly contemptuous of them. Social-democracy accepts (with due allowance for human frailty) the basic Christian-democratic values; bolshevism divorces itself from them and from any sense of proper humility which they entail.

### **Sacred Goals, Profane Tools**

The bolshevik revolution is in its nature *sacred*, generating an emotional emphasis which turns its adherents inward upon the apocalyptic image. This is hardly strange, for where objectives are vague and ill-defined, where the power of a given party (read: its leadership) is confused with the requirements of history, then the road to power absorbs the entire political agenda. The revolutionary upheaval and its preparation become the receptacle of all political wisdom—suffused with the discharged tensions of those who have committed themselves beyond recall to a simple, unforked road to social salvation. It is only fair to say that reformism too, like any other special method, has sought a halo of its own. But here the consequences, though sufficiently disturbing, have been relieved by the concentration upon tangible achievements in the here and now, always a reliable solvent of any vulgar mythology of redemption.

The tools of social and political action, devised with an eye toward what the world is really like, must be *profane* in character. As method, they must be secular, and therefore vulnerable to fact and

logic, before the requirements of pragmatic evaluation and democratic dispute can come into effective play. The revolutionary elements in gradualist socialism must be profane and secular rather than sacred and religious, for they will be circumscribed by the established character of the movement as a whole and limited to the achievement of specific, clearly-defined objectives. It should be emphasized that it is not *all action*, but the *tools* of action which must be profane. Within the general context of our movement, the revolutionary elements are tools, and in that sense subsidiary, at a second remove, from the primary, character-defining motifs. Indeed, it is just in terms of *what* is considered sacred that the most useful distinctions between movements are made. The fact that there are sacred elements in bolshevism is not, of itself, to be deprecated; it is what they hold sacred—the power-mechanisms of revolutionary action, the hypostatization of what can be only a tool of significant but limited usefulness—that marks them as alien. It is well to recall that revolution is more (and less) than the sheer annihilation of traditional values. Before the subversion of accepted human relationships is the plain, practical, limited goal of transferring social and political power from the hands of those who rule the commanding heights of our economy. *The achievement of the latter by revolutionary means is dictated by the empirical context of our problem*; to employ those means with sagacity and care requires an impersonal budget of consequences, an accounting which happily is strengthened by prior knowledge of the inherent dangers of our ambivalent tools.

The gradualist emphasis is revelant primarily to *institutional* change; it deprecates the uprooting of established forms where subtle transformations are practicable, ever conscious of the limited capacity of men and structures for the absorption of the thoroughgoing and all-pervasive. The bolsheviks do not escape these strictures, for in expunging the presently traditional they are far from casting men into new molds. The most they can achieve is a return to older forms, still founded on the enduring character of the human materials with which they must deal. The gradualist cannot make his peace with the bolshevik revolution, for that cuts at the moral groundwork of his society. But he will realize the necessity for a more limited revolt, profound in its ultimate consequences but concentrated against only a relatively small sector of society as we know it. He will, in the course of this action, be ready to defend those gains, received and won, which fashion a restrained, reflective and moral culture. To be sure, the inherent tension between revolution and reformism cannot be erased by the fiat of our own desires; nor is it unlikely that the former will, at some stages, spill over whatever dams we may con-

struct. But a prior limitation of goals, founded on a clear conception of alternative consequences, together with the steeping of our movement in a spiritual atmosphere in which only democracy can live, can assure the preservation of its institutionally gradualist character.

I repeat: we choose inevitably between polar trends and this choice defines the framework and direction of our politics. Yet the very recognition of the necessity which binds us to the existing political alternatives frees us for the more intelligent construction of a special program which will take into account an attempt to correct some of the cardinal weaknesses of the trend to which we are committed. We are still *proposing* for history to *dispose*, but insofar as we as individuals and small groups can influence the course of events, our special program, operating within the general trend, can be effective.

### Needed Revisions

The fruitful consequences of a dispraise of over-optimism are evident in the revisions we may make in the traditional social-democratic program. It is helpful to view the reformist's errors as largely stemming from an overly naive conception of the pliability of his environment. Failing to comprehend the weakness of men and institutions, he is blind to the necessity of taking that weakness into account and of shaping a program which will restrain the inevitable enfeebling dissipation of energy and intelligence. The revisions offered in the light of this perception are basically two:

I. *The practical socialist overturn must be complete within its limited sphere.* Over-optimistic gradualism has not understood the bearing of concentrated and interdependent industrialism on socialist strategy. Gradualism collapses as an effective program when we face the coordinated, integrated structure of our mass-production economy. There the strokes must be bold and thoroughgoing, permitting a speedy reorientation of that key sector of our economy along welfare lines. The failure to recognize this urgent necessity, or to prepare for that kind of action, was a fatal weakness of the social democratic governments in Europe. Firm and decisive measures, taken against the small number of ruling families and their satellites who staff the boards of directors of the hundred-odd apex corporations, need not undermine the institutionally gradualist approach. On the contrary: this politically and economically momentous but culturally insignificant stumbling-block must be energetically set aside in order to permit reformism to operate as an advance guard and in broader fields. This is the limited, but vital, sense in which socialism must be a revolutionary movement. Not to turn the social fabric inside out, but to recognize that a slow pace in changing man's behavior and status does not require a weak and timid

approach to the challenge of power in the essentially impersonal institutions of monopolistic industry and finance. The threat to the best in our civilization comes from those who rule at those heights; it is therefore conservative in its best sense to organize for decisive measures within that sphere. The socialist overturn neither ventures nor desires to root out the multitude in small industry, trade and agriculture; our program does not envision the introduction from above of a New Order in social relationships; but we can insist that that power—and no more—which now rests in the hands of the self-perpetuating industrial empires should be swiftly transferred to the responsible representatives of democratic government.

I use "overturn" here in an obvious, rather literal sense, denoting the actual mobilization of social forces in action. This is a proximate tool, not an ultimate objective. As a tool, it must be used coldly, with detachment, free of illusions as to the concrete forms it must take or as to what can be accomplished. Such an attitude will enable us to delineate an economic program attuned to those necessities of administrative responsibility and centralized direction dictated by the integrated character of the industrial system. We shall not expect miracles of democratic procedure and structure from instrumentalities which provide their own answers and, very largely, make their own rules. Yet it is this very sobriety which will help us to discover those democratic channels, consistent with the urgencies of production, which can be built into the economic order for whose effective functioning we are responsible. These statements would be counsels of despair were it not for our assumption of the restricted relevance for society as a whole of the revolutionary elements in our program, an outlook incomprehensible to those for whom Revolution is their sacred, all-embracing method. It is partly as a hangover from the consecrated approach to the revolutionary method that many socialists still insist upon a romantic view of its nature and its possible results. At the same time, forced to discard old blinkers, the uneasiness of ambiguity has led them to leave their program in the limbo of unconcretized proposals.

II. *Socialism must adopt the moral absolute of pacifism.* If social-democracy was naive about the method required for the transfer of control over the industrial apparatus, it was equally sanguine about the ability of men to choose consistently the method which embodied their own values. The pacifist absolute is such in respect to its function, operating as a hard rule for those groups which have testified to its truth. But the judgment and conclusion which it represents are empirical insights. It is a perception which provides a political reflex of our deepest moral values and is therefore a steady factor in political choice. Events have taught us that we

are unable to permit ourselves complete freedom in the continuous recreation of political decisions. We are too deeply involved in immediate relationships, too sharply influenced by proximate consequences to be able to maintain the integrity of our ultimate aims unaided by functional absolutes. Hence the need for an act of collective faith in the enduring viability of procedures which we accept as crucial to the character of our movement. Democracy is one of these functional absolutes; pacifism must be another. The unity of democracy and pacifism as an interdependent set of means and objectives becomes more plainly manifest as each new development in the modern world unfolds. These tenets are more than tools: where they operate they are constituent fundamentals of the movement, referable only to the moral sources of its being. Originating in and justified by a prophetic empirical insight, they come to transcend their beginnings, to be woven into the symbolic, expressive image of our aspirations. In this way we return to an old and proven method of taking into account dependable human failings. *This* revolution, which has to do with the character of men and movements rather than with the practical mobilization of forces, is in its nature sacred, and completely consistent with the gradualist spirit it shares.

This cursory review of pressing revisions in the traditional social-democratic program, while radical, does not divorce us from the main stream of that polar trend. We should work as political missionaries, from within, sharing inevitably what is culpable and what is undefiled in the movement as a whole. Because we have a history, we cannot offer a "spotless banner." But the clear perception of where we must take our stand, the sober appraisal of what we have to deal with and what can be done, will help to deliver us from the pseudo-arena where "vacant shuttles weave the wind."

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