

The New Socialist Revolution

Michael Parenti

The New Socialist Revolution, An Introduction to its Theory and Strategy, by Michael P. Lerner, New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1973, 324 pp. paperback.

Not long after the Movement gathered strength in the 1960's and began to deepen its criticism of American policies at home and abroad, the nation's scribes, academics, politicians and media pundits launched their counterattack. Sparing themselves no snideness or slander, they painted a grotesque picture of the protestors, likening them to Hitler Youth and labeling them the enemies of all decency and democracy. Sometimes the New Leftists were depicted as rigid totalitarians, sometimes as wanton undisciplined anarchists. Sometimes they were called self-indulgent brats and other times self-sacrificing fanatics. Sometimes they were accused of being excessive idealists, other times mindless nihilists, sometimes hyper-intellectual, other times anti-intellectual. When not denounced for wanting to run society according to their own preconceived plans, they were criticized for failing to offer an alternative blueprint to the existing system.

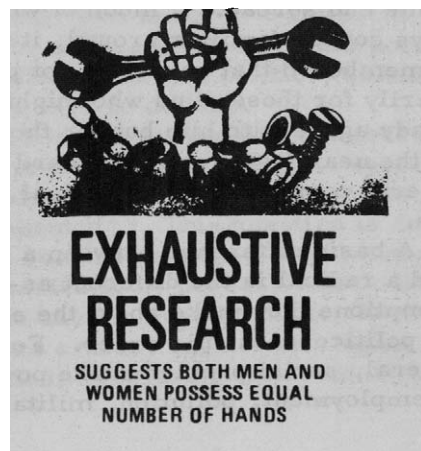
While criticizing the dissenters for their lack of civility and restraint, the Establishment spokesmen showed little restraint and civility of their own. Their fulminations against the Movement degenerated into the worse kind of radical-baiting. They expended more passion denouncing those who opposed war, militarism and mass murder than those who perpetrated such crimes. At a time when hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese were being slaughtered and thousands of protestors at home were

being beaten and jailed on trumped-up charges, they accused the New Leftists of being the peculiar purveyors of violence, the unwashed, obscene "new barbarians."

Those who argue that leftist rhetoric and tactics alienated the great bulk of Americans seem to overlook the fact that the dissenters never got a chance to reach the mass public, and that between the Movement and the people there stood those who own and control the radio and television stations, and the newspapers and magazines, those who define and filter much of our social reality and political experience. They were most effective in smothering the dialogue that the Movement tried to create, and they did so by focusing public attention not on the issues, but on those doing the protesting, thereby making the demonstrators themselves the issue. Indeed, they made it seem as if the demonstrators were the cause of the very social ills against which they demonstrated.

Now that the campuses have quieted down, the new pastime of Establishment commentators and opinionators is to announce the death of the radical movement in the United States. Today's youth, they tell us, have tired of protest; the spree is over and the kids have returned to their books and careers, working within and for the system; today's college youth have put the 1960's behind them and are looking ahead to the 1950's so to speak.

In the face of all this, I have found myself wishing someone would write a



book explaining how and why radicalism is more than a passing fad of undergraduates, a book that would analyze the impressive changes in American political consciousness over the last decade and would grasp the difference between the left's temporary discouragement and its supposed demise, a volume I could pass on to my more skeptical and rather ill-informed liberal associates whose stereotyped image of the New Left seems never to have gone beyond the pages of the New York Times Sunday Magazine or its ideological equivalents.

The New Socialist Revolution by Michael P. Lerner, a philosophy professor at Trinity College, Hartford, who helped start the New American Movement, turns out to be the kind of book I have in mind. In a single volume, Lerner successfully attempts: (a) an overview of the social injustice of American capitalism, its social structure and its effect on the quality of our lives, (b) an analysis of imperialism, racism and sexism and their links to capitalist society, (c) a critique of liberal myths, assumptions and apologies, (d) a description of the social groups that compose the forces of change, (e) a presentation of how we might make socialism a reality and what would constitute that reality. Writing in clear, cool prose, unadorned by rhetorical flourishes, Lerner devotes the first third of his book to a succinct rendition of the oppressions of the U.S. politico-economic system at home and abroad. If much of what he says covers familiar ground, it must be remembered that he writes not primarily for those of us who might already agree with him but for those who in the near future might discard their liberal complaints for a radical analysis.

A basic difference between a liberal and a radical is the different assumptions they make about the established politico-economic order. For the liberal, social problems like poverty, unemployment, pollution, militarism

and overseas interventionism are the aberrant offshoots of an essentially rational, workable system. Thus, Vietnam is a "mistake," the misery of Appalachia or Watts is the result of "changing times" and the poverty of the elderly who can no longer sell their labor on the market is due to "shameful neglect." For the radical, however, these social problems are not innocent and odd happenings, rather they are quite "rational" outcomes (i. e., inevitable understandable effects) of an essentially irrational system, a system that is organized around the conscious use and abuse of social, human and natural resources for the sake of profit-oriented production. To call for a solution to our immense politico-economic problems within the framework of the very politico-economic system that creates them is illusionary. The liberal, as Lerner notes, repeatedly comes up with incorrect prescriptions because he starts with an incorrect diagnosis. Lerner's comparison of the liberal and radical positions is worth quoting at length:

Since all [liberals] start from the assumption that the ills of the system have nothing to do with its essence, the fault must be with the individuals who have gained power. This assumption may not always be spoken, but it necessarily underlies the belief that electing THE GOOD GUYS to office will make everything fine. Liberals who accuse radicals of being power hungry and self-righteous are overlooking the fact that they are the ones who talk about a small group of people getting power. It is precisely because radicals do not pretend to be any more intelligent and any more ethical than those who preceded them that they do not want to use the same techniques that deformed so many good people in the past. The radical does not seek to get the right person elected, to substitute "us" for "them." Rather he seeks to break down the system of power and re-

distribute power to all people. The liberal calls for a new ruling elite; the radical calls for the elimination of ruling elites.

And elsewhere Lerner notes: "It is precisely because radicals take liberal ideals seriously that they see the need for a revolution in which these ideals could be more fully developed, so that they are no longer merely formal principles, but are part of the actual content of people's lives."

For all his talk about reform, the liberal's primary commitment, Lerner suggests, is to the maintenance of his own professional and class privileges within the ongoing system. And when social change threatens his social position, the liberal begins to talk and act in ways that make it hard to distinguish him from a conservative. But among the more dissident groups, the Blacks, youth, students, workers and women,



Lerner sees hopeful changes. In so many words, he suggests that not only consciousness but unconsciousness is changing, not only the articulated demands and grievances but the unspoken assumptions, images and expectations about the system. No matter what the media pundits say, the 1950's are not returning. Too many Americans have lost their innocence; too many are catching wise to capitalism.

Lerner's discussion of the counter-culture is especially good. It reflects the ambivalence that all socialists might feel toward the "Woodstock Nation." On the one hand, the hippie and yippie youth have been instrumental in exposing some of the cultural tyrannies and hypocrisies of our social institutions. On the other, their political analysis has often been ill-defined, privatized and evasive of political realities. As Lerner puts it:

If the goal of life is simply good vibes and pleasant experiences, serious struggle will inevitably be avoided. Why become involved in hassles? Struggle, we are told, is a bummer. It is true that as long as the rulers have the immense power of the police and military at their disposal, those who struggle will face unpleasant consequences. Grooving on trees and flowers is less likely to lead one into trouble than demonstrating against the murder of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Why not let everyone "do their own thing"? "Different strokes for different folks." This position often leads to a political quietism that is hard to disturb.

Those who recognize the abuses of the present socio-economic system commonly complain: "Yes, but what can we do about it?" This question is deserving of a serious response even when posed rhetorically by persons who do not believe anything can be done. Lerner offers a wide range of strategies and tactics, everything from organizing

people's councils to publishing a socialist newspaper and starting a new socialist party. Whether or not we agree with all his suggestions, he makes it clear that there is plenty to be done. The problem is not finding things to do but finding the people to do them. What the Movement needs are large numbers of persons who, in the face of all frustrations and harassments, can work devotedly on the many organizing tasks which promise neither gain or glory, and for goals which might not be achieved in our lifetime.

Many people are reluctant to embrace socialism because they feel it offers no real alternative. "What would you replace the present system with? And, "What makes you think your system would be any better?" These questions get asked sooner or later. The conviction that there can be no workable alternative makes it all the more necessary to construct as clear a picture of one as is possible at this stage. A radical's task is to liberate the social imagination so he and others are capable of thinking about new social arrangements and new kinds of social realities. In the concluding pages of his book, Lerner offers his own picture of how a socialist society would work. Workers would be directly in control of their work conditions; communities would organize and rule themselves; questions of national scope would be decided by direct referenda; the economy would be decentralized; the media would be open to any individual or group having something to say, and the wealth and labor of the nation would be used to enhance the life chances of the many rather than the profits and power of the few. Lerner's presentation is well thought out but it perforce remains something of a contrivance. One wishes he had spent time in some country that is already struggling with the task of building a socialist society, for instance, Cuba or China; it might have given him some real life experiences to draw upon, and a flesh and blood sense of what to do and what not to do.

One also wishes that Lerner had spent less time settling scores with the Socialist Workers Party, Progressive Labor, SDS, The Weathermen, Tom Hayden and other groups and individuals on the left, or at least that he had done it in a more systematic way. Either he should have reserved a special section for a criticism of leftist organizations or he should have dropped the subject. Instead, what we get are frequent and hurried digressions telling us how wrong-headed other leftists have been, thrusts which sometimes sound querulous and distract from his central thesis. In charging just about every organized radical group with sectarianism, non-sectarian radicals sometimes begin to sound a little sectarian themselves.

One also wishes that Lerner, like so many other American radicals, would not get carried away by his anti-Stalinism and anti-Sovietism. It is a bit much to assert that the Soviet system and Stalin's ruthlessness caused a suffering among the Russian people almost equal to what the working class endured during two hundred years of industrial revolution in the west, an era which included fourteen hour work days, child labor, starvation wages, chronic underemployment, massive destitution and a human misery that staggers the mind. For all its iniquities, Stalinist socialism initiated one of the most advanced health and medical systems in the world, made work available to everyone, and established work conditions for miners and other workers in hazardous occupations and social and recreational services that have yet to be emulated in most western capitalist nations. Surely socialists like Lerner can develop a critique of the Stalinist years that is more sophisticated than the crap which the anti-communist press has been feeding us for so long.

Most of all, one wishes Lerner could have spent less time lecturing to that increasingly reified entity, the New Left, in tones that are sometimes as scolding and stereotyped as the kind found in

most bourgeois publications. He complains about imaginary New Leftists who just want to "scream, yell and trash." He denies the profound commitment of those who have taken heavy risks and resorted to acts of violence; rather he depicts them as romantics and self-indulgent play-actors. He takes the correct position that terrorism is not a substitute for politics but then seems to dismiss it as not having any role to play at the present time, not even as a "propaganda of the deed." He anticipates that the coming American revolution, like all revolutions, will be far less violent than the system it replaces, but he does not tell us what is going to be done about the right-wing police and army which now stand guard over the system, a question that becomes increasingly important after the tragedy of Chile.


Whatever complaints one might have, Lerner's book is a vital and useful work. His message is urgent: "One of the greatest horrors of the modern world is


that we have lost our ability to be horrified. Losing our sense of outrage at the brutalization and dehumanization we and our fellow human beings are subjected to, being able to do business as usual in a social system that degrades us as it murders others--this is the final triumph of capitalism." But the triumph is not really final, for he adds: "We must never underestimate capitalism's flexibility and possible cooptive powers; at the same time, we must see that the crisis facing the empire has in many ways weakened the system, reduced the number of alternatives available to it and reduced the liberal's confidence in their ability to reform it." The system becomes increasingly incapable of hiding its corruption and disguising its abuses. The people seem infinitely apathetic and hopelessly uncomprehending, until the transformation in unconsciousness moves into consciousness and consciousness moves toward actions and the actions of some mobilize others. Eventually people gain "a sense of their own potential agency--they find they are able to act in the world instead of merely to view it," Lerner reminds us. "Suddenly one realizes that history is made by ordinary human beings like oneself, and not by supernatural creatures one can only read about in the newspapers and see on television. It is just this sense of potential agency that is crucial for building a revolutionary movement."

Far from being a left-over from the 1960's, The New Socialist Revolution deals with things that are still very much with us and will become ever more urgent in the years ahead.

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