

Verbiage on the 'Left'

By ELGIN WILLIAMS

IT IS REASONABLE to suppose that before very long the "Left" will cache some old and cherished relics whose sedulous preservation and perennial renovation now sap its energies. That these totems are beautiful and venerable cannot be denied. What is more writ in the skies than the divergence of class interests? When is a man more rapt than before the labor theory of value? What is more reasonable than that one must fight for what one gets in this world? And it cannot be denied that they are worse than useless for theorizing and practice.

Each and every one of these keepsakes fulfills a sanctifying purpose and none other. They are not used in actual analysis but are attempts to answer meaningless questions and to extend blessing to actions amply justified by secular concerns. They make up the "Left" philosophy and psychology and while they probably will continue to be refined and reconsidered and "brought up to date," they should be forgotten.

1. *The theory of "classes."* That amiable animism which has always served mankind so well by way of dramatizing otherwise colorless natural processes has endowed the "Left" with a heroic theory of society on the grand scale. On this view mores, milieus, even machines appear as individuals possessed of personalities with interests of their own at heart. The "classes," as they are called, are furthermore gifted with powers for good and evil. We read that the laboring (or perhaps the middle) class is the hope of the world. Even the growth of science and the application of knowledge to human organization take on the guise of a class "struggle."

This inveterate propensity to dissect affairs in terms of

hierarchical groups cannot conceive social processes except as "leadership," "rule," and "control." We find Leftists saying that modern industrial processes are built on centralization of "authority" and "rigid organization from the top down into which each worker fits at his appointed hierarchical level." Painting, composing, and writing are seen as the "creation" of an "aristocracy of talent." Intellectual activity is treated as a special type of "controversy." It is perhaps gratuitous to point out that science and the technical and fine arts know nothing of these institutional categories of status and authority and cannot be explained in their terms.

Leftists now recognize in practice that classes—social incarnations of science and superstition—do not exist. The atom of social good and evil is the habit, the idea. Of course no class has a monopoly on scientific (good) action and no Leftist analyst ever says so except for rhetorical purposes. Rather each individual (which is to say, the community) is seen to be a mixture of "progressive" and "reactionary" habits. It is notorious that *avant-garde* artists are reactionary in politics, and vice-versa. *Habits that cut across class lines* inhibit or liberate life, they are human or inhuman, and the Leftist's practical concern is with revising *them*, not liquidating classes. It is a recurring hard question for the Leftist whether we are in the muck because pirates are in authority or because people *trust* pirates to run their affairs.

"Class," like other Marxist jargon, is, as Wright Mills has pointed out, *needlessly alienative*. But the point is not merely to change the language to avoid estranging people. The point is to drop the belief altogether because it hinders analysis and estranges people to boot.

2. *The divergence of class "interests."* It is hard to find a Leftist today who does not accept the divergence of class interests along with the roundness of the earth; this as a matter

of form. It is also almost impossible to find this belief in the substance of their theorizing and practice. They may write (for instance) that the Government is "labor's" chief antagonist or raise the query: Tax reduction *for whom?* But when the actions of Government are portrayed it is seen that what is had in mind is that they are inefficient actions; inefficient, that is to say, for everybody, for cultural continuity if you want to put it that way.

It is apparent from a study of their writings that what Leftists really mean by a conflict of interests is a conflict of *habits*. Convert the axiological into motor terms and their discourse presents no difficulty. At least the only difficulty is that, like other aspects of "class" doctrine, it is needlessly alienative.

There are two good reasons why Leftists should never, never even *talk*, in their most frivolous moments, as if they believed in a divergence of class interests. In the first place, it sounds like they accept bourgeois values, that they believe it is really to the benefit of the rich to carry on as they do, and who since "The Little Foxes" and "Mrs. Parkington" could take seriously people who say such things? In the second place, it's as impossible to talk about atomic power and full employment and plastics *hurting* anybody as it is to talk about unemployment and *slams* and killing *helping* anybody. As Leftists are coming to recognize (implicitly), science and sanitation and social progress don't hurt anybody's *real* interests (and unless they mean real interests, they should say conflicts occur between habits) and depressions make even capitalists jump out of windows.

3. *The labor theory of value*. This theory of authorship is of course linked intimately with the theory of class. Like its partner it never comes onstage save for State occasions. In actual analysis it has no place. What Marx was getting at was the inefficiency of economic institutions. In his system

labor was a pecuniary not a motor category. At the same time he felt that keeping the machines running was not a good enough end in its own right and therefore to "justify" changing the institutions he reiterated an old fairy tale to the effect that workmen "create" the means of life with their labor.

Of course this theory is precisely comparable to that in which "capital" plays the stellar role, or to that which endows the artist with heroic powers. As we now know, the productive process is a communal process and any individual worker achieves what he does by virtue of the communal accumulation of tools. Technological (or artistic) proficiency is an affair of the whole community and its cultural heritage; of its knowledge of ways and means by far the greater part comes down out of the past.

It is not because they are getting "robbed" of the "produce of their labor" that workers should have their purchasing power increased. It is because continually expanding mass markets are requisite for industry to keep going at all.

4. *The extortion theory of history.* Among the gaudiest trappings of contemporary Leftists is their theory of history. It, perhaps more than any other totem, is the proudest shown and most publicly paid verbal homage; while their very lives show that the feet of this idol are clay.

"Every group of workers," a Leftist writes, "like other social groups, gets just as much as it has the strength and daring to extort." Don't talk to me about your Casals and your Einsteins, he shouts; they're just like Jay Cooke and Commodore Vanderbilt. (Except weaker and less daring, of course.)

Besides being a well-nigh insufferable insult to most people (who occupy themselves not with extortion but with reading and turning lathes and minding the baby) and a well-nigh intolerable libel on the rest (who don't "get" anything, ex-

cept an accumulation of pecuniary symbols and perhaps stomach ulcers) this theory is not true to history, even Leftist history. It is a brave man these days who ventures that people have "got" symphonies and windows in their houses by struggle, extortion, and other forms of "mutual defeat."

Not that the Leftists don't number such gallants. A recent writer calls intellectuals "the powerless people" because they are not "politically effective." (The classic example of the political ineffective being Marx, that bookworm of the British museum, I suppose.) He goes on to say:

Since the model of [the intellectual's] type of controversy is rational argumentation, rather than skilled violence or stupid rhetoric, it keeps him from seeing these other and *historically more decisive* types of controversy. (Italics added.)

Just *where* historically have violence and rhetoric been decisive? Of course the Leftist doesn't mention, and indeed will go on (in the pages that follow) to detail the gross *indecisiveness* of present-day "skilled violence." But the real proof that he is just kidding (or, rather, paying obeisance to a totem) in his own work. Peirce always said that what a man believes is what he does. On this criterion the author quoted and all the rest (whatever they say in moods of contrition and warlike emulation) believe the pen will take the sword hands down.

5. "*Rights*" and the brotherhood of man. When it feels it really has to bring out its blockbusters, PM, the New York newspaper that wears its social conscience on its sleeve, will say that a social issue is a matter of "human rights versus property rights." Well, one expects such things of PM. It is otherwise with serious Leftist critics. And in all fairness it must be said that they do better, most of the time. And it must also be said that when it comes to a formal, crucial statement of value they too take their stand on human rights and the brotherhood of man.

Thus articles devoted to the sabotage of Negro industrial capacity are indignant over the flouting of the (God-given) perquisites listed in the Constitution. The final (formal) ground on which a stand is taken against the impending League for Legalized War is the "sense of fellowship" and "respect for humanity." Removing conditions which make it impossible for homosexuals to work is justified by their right to "individual integrity." And so on.

The point about all these protestations is that they are beside the point. Whether or not Negroes or nations or homosexuals or people in general have rights, institutions and behaviors must and do come in for scrutiny on other grounds, grounds which make quite academic the discussion of "rights." Sexual discrimination is shown to interfere with the intellectual effort, racial discrimination to interfere with the war effort, the war effort itself to interfere with the cultural effort, and so on. "The citizens of industrial society must consume more abundantly," C. E. Ayres once wrote, "not because it is their right to do so, and not because justice or equality or any similar shibboleth is a valid guide to economic welfare, but because if they do not, industrial society will collapse, values and all."¹

Five favorite Leftist concepts have been analyzed in the attempt to show that they are totemic devices essentially unrelated to the job at hand. The first criticism made was that these beliefs involve setting up ends-in-themselves. Policy cannot be justified by calling it "pro-labor," and people are certainly not born into any "inalienable rights." Actions

¹ A poignant recent illustration of the naïveté (and ineffectiveness) of the doctrine of rights is the Left opposition to the proposed compulsory military training. So concerned was it with the protection of the Individual against the State that quite generally the basic argument of military training proponents was unchallenged; namely, that military training is a preparedness measure. There is no evidence that such is the case. Machines and techniques win wars, and it is no accident that the nation with the longest history of insubordination and lack of discipline—anathema to the "military spirit"—is also the nation which unlocked the secret of atomic energy. Radar and streptomycin are not discovered on the drill field.

must be judged in terms of their consequences. Social change is essentially a learning process, and the learning process cannot be short-circuited. To posit this does not mean gradualism, compromise, but just the opposite: uncompromising theory and uncompromising analysis of *all* "classes," *all* means. If "politics" be defined as the creation of "myths" to "win" the masses—what Marx called "names, battle slogans, and costumes"—then what we will eventually witness is not the reform of but the abolition of politics.

The second criticism was that these concepts do not arise out of the work of analysis itself but are efforts to battle with false problems from the metaphysical past. Such is the problem of "interests": the problem exists at all only because two words, "self-interest" and "general welfare," happen to exist. Such is the problem of "rights": who has what rights and how they are to rank in case of conflict is not an issue for intelligence to solve but an affair of *ipse dixit*.

What little we have to be thankful for in social discussion today is precisely due to the fact that social theorists are forgetting these problems and others like them. In a famous article A. F. Bentley once asked physicists who were getting excited about the "philosophical" ravings of Jeans and Eddington: "What difference can it make to the physicist whether 'ideas,' 'concepts,' 'minds' really 'exist' or not, or whether anybody else thinks they exist or not?" Somebody ought to say to the Leftists: "What difference can it possibly make to you whether 'classes' or 'rights' or 'interests' really exist or not? Get on with your work."

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