

DOES THE LEFT IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE A FUTURE?

Gerald E. Marsh

Gerald E. Marsh is a physicist, retired from Argonne National Laboratory, who has worked and published widely in the areas of science, nuclear power, and foreign affairs. He was a consultant to the Department of Defense on strategic nuclear technology and policy in the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, and served with the U.S. START (arms control) delegation in Geneva. He is a Fellow of the American Physical Society. His most recent book is: "The Phantom Defense: America's Pursuit of the Star Wars Illusion" (Praeger Press).

The Left in the US is in crisis. It has lost the broad support it once enjoyed in the working class and finds itself captive to the past—or, worse yet, to an impotent radicalism. It no longer offers working people a political outlet for their interests, but only a means of protest about issues that are not central to their lives.

That is because it has not yet come to terms with its own ideological crisis: its inability to formulate a coherent and viable alternative to a market economy. The centralized, pyramidal command structure of the Socialist form of government, and the idea that the “Party” can lead and represent the best interests of the people, has over the last century repeatedly shown itself, to be a moral and economic disaster. In the end, given human nature, it does not appear that the Socialist model can be made to work, and attempts to do so have led to enormous human suffering. Like it or not, this is the lesson of the twentieth century. The radical and anti-capitalist left has not learned it.

Those who retain aspirations toward equality and social justice, and are unwilling to abandon the promise implicit in the ideals of Socialism, must realize that there is no alternative to market capitalism. They must find their values and ends entirely within this frame of reference. The underlying ideals of Socialism need not be abandoned, but they cannot be expressed through a centralized Party structure that controls the means of production.

Laissez faire capitalism, the darling of Conservatives and the *bête noir* of the Left, has been dead for many years. Modern day capitalism is heavily regulated to prevent the wild business cycles of the past. Today we have recessions not depressions. This is achieved by setting the rules of the game, through regulatory policy, tax structures, and public spending. Coupled with modern technology and automation, the result has been the almost incredible rise in productivity since WW-II, and the rise of the middle class.

The Left must not only formulate a new identity that is not based on protest, but must also curtail its focus on hot button social issues almost to the exclusion of the economic and structural limitations on people’s well being. The Left must live up to its

responsibility to offer a viable political alternative to working people and abandon its fixation on multicultural identity politics. The basic ideal of a more equitable society must be its *raison d'être*.

Today the greatest challenge is globalization, a phenomenon that is not under the control of any one nation or group of nations. It represents a new phase of capitalism, an evolution made possible by the revolution in communications and transportation over the last few decades: it is now profitable to manufacture goods and transport them to markets from many places around the world. As the cost of high-bandwidth communications drops, the same is becoming true of services.

In its scope and impact on the societies of the world, globalization is comparable to the industrial revolution. And it is no more under the control of individual corporations or nations than the industrial revolution was by the barons of that age. And while the world as a whole may ultimately benefit from this development, the transition may be difficult and painful for many people, as was the case during the industrial revolution.

The problem that the Left should be addressing is how to control and humanize a capitalism that has come to be dominated by finance and is unconfined by national boundaries. Even on a national basis, and much less so when confronting the forces of globalization, it often seems impossible to achieve and maintain the strong social coherence needed to prevent market capitalism from evolving into a market society, one where values and social relations are dominated by class identity determined by an individual's relation to the economy. As Marx and Engels put it, capitalism leaves “no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’ It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade.” Today, there is an aura of mustiness about this thesis—a conception so central to Marxist thought. Implicit in it is a narrowing of the spectrum of human relations that has been transcended in many modern capitalist states. But in the context of globalization, the quote still resonates.

Whether one views globalization as a boon or a calamity, there is no way individual governments or international organizations beholden to national interests can reverse or even exert effective transnational control over this new phase of capitalism. Societies must adapt—although they don't have to do it passively! To begin with, the Left should focus on gaining political power by working to form an effective international labor movement. Unionizing a single country in the context of globalization is like forming a small company union and not amalgamating it with a nationally based union—a sure route to failure. If modern transportation and communication are globalization's facilitators, then international unionization of their workers could be a powerful step toward international industrial and manufacturing unions, on the road to achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth.

But how to engender global solidarity? Building class consciousness has never been easy, and there are no simple answers. But the most important element needed to build solidarity is the realization by advanced and developing economies that globalization is not a zero-sum game, and is not necessarily a race to the bottom. Modern capitalism has shown over and over again, contrary to Marx and Engels, that it is not true that “The average price of wage-labor is the minimum wage, *i.e.*, that quantum of the means of subsistence which is absolutely requisite to keep the laborer in bare existence as a laborer.”

Economists and people involved in business have long recognized that if it is to be viable, capitalism must be reconciled with a socially acceptable distribution of its costs and benefits. Globalization has the potential to end the grinding poverty that most people of the world suffer while increasing the wellbeing of the developed world. The Left can help this evolution occur with a minimum of social pain.

Globalization may lift all boats, but it will not necessarily level the disparities in wealth. As put by John Kenneth Galbraith, “Let there be a coalition of the concerned . . .

The affluent would still be affluent, the comfortable still comfortable, but the poor would be part of the political system”, but no doubt still relatively poor. How the wealth should be distributed defines the political spectrum.

To be attractive to working people in the US, the Left must move away from its ideological and industrial beginnings and formulate policies and programs that appeal to white collar and service workers as well as industrial workers. Most importantly, it must become part of the domestic political process.

The lack of a viable political alternative to the Republican or Democratic Party—the latter viewed by many today as Republican-Light—leads to depressingly low voter turnouts that reflect the alienation of large segments of the population from the political process. Because those most directly affected are not represented, there is a chipping away of the progress made by the New Deal and The Great Society. Whatever their deficiencies, these programs form the basis for the limited social safety net that exists in this country.

The Democratic and Republican parties are themselves victims of the leveling of the old elite segments of the population, clearing the way for the rise of mass culture. The silent majority—who lack a well defined political identity and often have difficulty identifying their own self interests—have been given a powerful voice by radical changes in technology and the character of the media. There is a vast industry trying to capture people’s opinions and, independent of whether they make political sense or reflect good judgement, impose them on elected representatives. Both parties sway to the wind of populism counterbalanced only by the pressure of special interests. This polarization leads to an alienation that the Left must understand does not serve its narrow political interests or those of the people as a whole.

It is no longer fashionable to speak of the “working class”. It smacks too much of a rigid Marxist category that denies the possibility of social and economic mobility. But

with the loss of this class self-identification also came the loss of those large-scale organizations that served as the collective representatives of labor. Whatever they are called, the working classes still exist but they have lost their political and organizational voice.

To counter this lack of representation and growing alienation, the Left must offer a positive program for how the country should evolve. It needs a vision for the future. And, given a coherent vision, it must revitalize the Democratic Party: third parties have fared poorly in this country, and working through the Democratic Party is more likely to succeed than attempting to form a new one.

Most of those who do not bother to be a part of the political process are service workers, an economic sector that has been sadly neglected for many years. Service workers need to be unionized nationally, both to increase their share of the economic pie and to serve as a base for forming an international service workers' union. Unionization would bring these people into the political process and greatly change the political landscape. A very good beginning has been made by SEIU, the Service Employees International Union, which now has more than 1.8 million members who, the union maintains, are "united by the belief in the dignity and worth of workers and the services they provide and dedicated to improving the lives of workers and their families and creating a more just and humane society." Certainly a goal that all progressive people can support.

Service workers also include those segments of society that have traditionally not belonged to unions, professional workers such as engineers, scientists, information technology specialists, and many others whose occupations are now beginning to be affected by the forces of globalization. A modern union movement must appeal to, and address, the issues affecting this broad, traditionally non-unionized segment of the population.

The Left needs to take on the issues of pensions and health care. Both represent a burden on companies and productivity. Many more people would find employment if companies did not carry these burdens. Entrepreneurial people who would like to go out on their own cannot do so because of the lack of affordable health care. Both issues are ripe for the Left to focus on, and can form key issues for revitalizing the Democratic Party.

But identifying issues does not constitute a vision for the future. Republicans of various stripes have such a vision. It is based on the idea that most social services should be curtailed or limited because they soon become dependencies that evolve into entitlements; that the best way to maximize the well being of all people is to have them stand on their own two feet—through self sufficiency and individual responsibility; that large government is a drain on the economy and unduly constrains people's freedom. There is more, and while the Left may not disagree with every facet of this vision, it needs to offer a real alternative.

The vision that the Left must offer is one where not only great private wealth exists, but also great public wealth. One where a child born into the meanest of circumstances will have the chance, because of adequate social institutions and infrastructure, to lead a healthy, fulfilling, and productive life. Today, a child born into such circumstances often faces being brought up in a dysfunctional family living in a pathological subculture. Such a child will often have poor health care and nutrition and, because such children carry the heavy burden of early neglect, are incapable of functioning in good schools much less the poor ones within which they must survive. There is much fertile ground here upon which to grow a vision for the future.