

# America's Left Has Taken a Wrong Turn

BY GERALD E. MARSH

*"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, have, over the last century, repeatedly shown themselves to be moral and economic disasters." Still, this is the platform the Democrats insist upon pushing.*

THE LEFT IN THE U.S. 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, as 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, have, over the last century, repeatedly shown themselves to be moral and economic disasters. 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 20th century—one the radical and anticapitalist Left refuses to learn.

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 need to 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 regulated heavily 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 an unprecedented rise in productivity since World War II—and of the middle class.

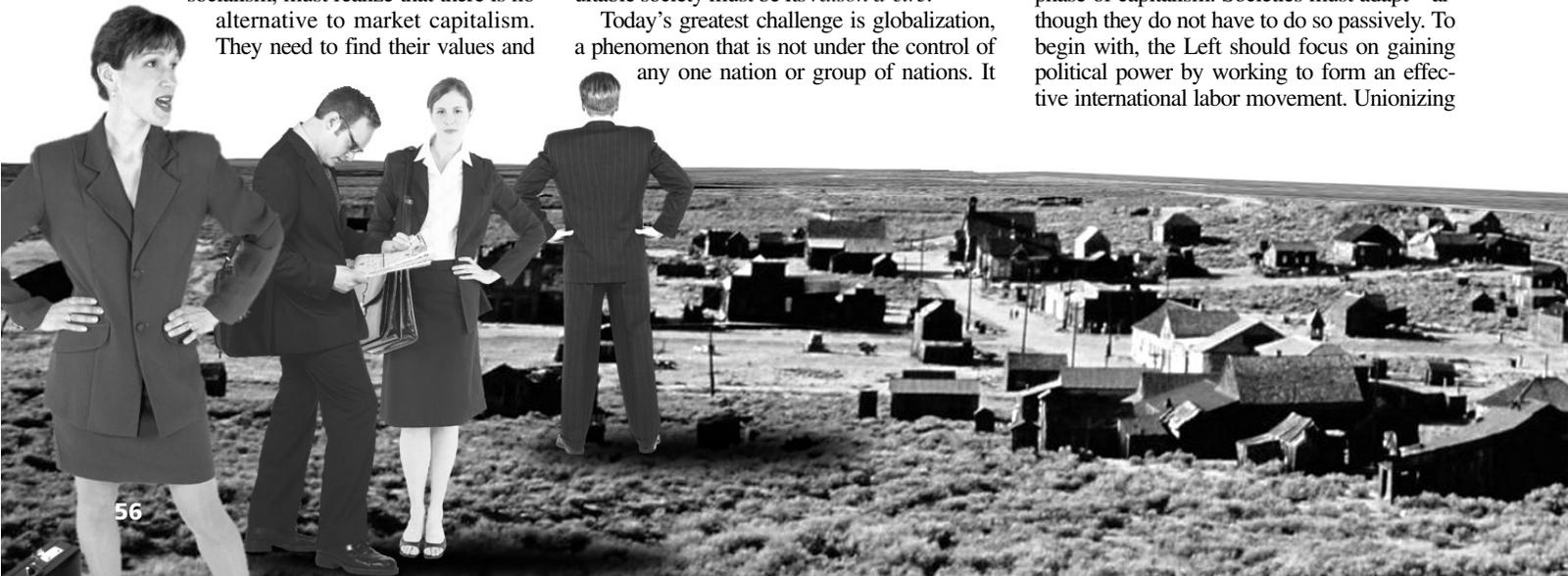
The Left not only has to formulate a new identity that is not based on protest, but curtail its focus on hot-button social issues almost to the exclusion of the economic and structural limitations on people's well-being. The Left should live up to its responsibility to offer a viable political alternative to working individuals and abandon its fixation on multicultural identity politics. The basic ideal of a more equitable society must be its *raison d'être*.

Today's 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 now is 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. While the world as a whole ultimately may benefit from this development, the transition likely will be difficult and painful for many.

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 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. It is not true that, as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, 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 infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade." There is an aura of mustiness about this thesis that is 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. However, in the context of globalization, the quote still resonates.

Whether one views globalization as a boon or 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 do not have to do so 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 one—a sure route to failure. If modern transportation and communication are globalization's facilitators, then international unionization of workers could be a powerful step toward international industrial and manufacturing unions, on the road to achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Yet, how can global solidarity be engendered? Building class consciousness never has been easy, and there are no simple answers, although the most important element needed 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 the opinion of Marx and Engels—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 long have 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 so many in this world suffer while increasing the well-being 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 economist 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,” yet, no doubt, still relatively poor. How the wealth should be distributed defines the political spectrum. To be attractive to American workers, the Left must move away from its ideological and industrial beginnings and formulate policies and programs that appeal to the white collar and service labor force 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 parties—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 Great Society. Whatever their deficiencies, these programs form the basis for the social safety net that exists in this country.

The Democratic and Republican parties are 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 pinpointing 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 no longer is 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. Yet, with the loss of this class self-identification has come 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 has to offer a positive program for how the country should evolve. It needs a vision for the future. Given a coherent vision, it needs to 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 neglected for many years. They need to be unionized nationally—to increase their share of the economic pie as well as form the base of an international service workers' union. Unionization would bring these individuals 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 1,800,000 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.” This certainly is a goal that all progressives can support.

Service workers also include those segments of society that traditionally have not belonged to unions, professionals such as engineers, scientists, information technology specialists, and many others whose occupations are affected by the forces of globalization. A modern union movement must appeal to, and address, the issues relevant to this broad, traditionally nonunionized segment.

The Left has to take on the issues of pensions and health care, which represent a burden on companies and productivity that ultimately hold down employment. Potential entrepreneurs who would like to go out on their own cannot do so because of the lack of affordable health care. Identifying issues, however, 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. Since the Left disagrees strongly with many facets of this vision, it needs to offer a real alternative.

The vision that the Left must put forth is one where not only great private wealth exists, but great public wealth—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, someone born into such blight often faces being brought up in a dysfunctional family living in a pathological subculture. Such an individual often will have substandard health care and nutrition and, because such youngsters 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. ★

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