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Peter Viereck

A THIRD VIEW OF THE NEW DEAL

"Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat; and when it comes, turns out to be not what they meant; and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."—WILLIAM MORRIS

"The strange alchemy of time has somehow converted the Democrats into the truly conservative party of this country—the party dedicated to conserving all that is best, and building solidly and safely on these foundations."—ADLAI STEVENSON, 1952

I

NEW DEAL LIBERAL: "The New Deal was not communist-infiltrated, as the hysterical witch-hunters charged. Instead, it represented a native radicalism that wisely hindered Wall Street, educated the masses to become less conservative than before, and discarded outdated institutions."

Republican: "The New Deal was communist-infiltrated, just as our patriotic businessmen charged at the time. *Therefore*, it helped communism, foolishly hindered Wall Street, made the masses less conservative than before, and discarded our traditional institutions."

Third view (new conservative): "Both wrong: the former in denying the New Deal was communist-infiltrated, the latter in believing it helped communism. It was indeed infiltrated, just as charged by Republican businessmen and documented by the testimonies of Weyl, Wadleigh, Massing, Pressman, Chambers. Because its communist sympathizers were often so *conspicuous*, *therefore* the New Deal hindered communism, helped Wall Street, made the masses more conservative than before, and preserved our traditional institutions."

In this imaginary trialogue, the word "conspicuous" explains the word "therefore." Entirely aside from its harmful quota of

cleverly secret spies like Ware, Silvermaster, Hiss, the New Deal contained a helpful quota of stupidly conspicuous pro-communists. Helpful, because their presence deluded businessmen into deeming the New Deal radical and anti-capitalist. If businessmen had been less naive, more sophisticated, better informed, if they had realized that the New Deal was actually rescuing and stabilizing capitalism (via SEC, guarantee of bank deposits, a larger, richer consumer-market), then they would not have been enraged beyond endurance against the New Deal. Had they not been enraged beyond endurance, they would not have attacked the New Deal with an intemperance so extreme that it performed an otherwise impossible miracle: it converted the then radical masses to the actually unradical New Deal, as opposed to the genuinely radical alternatives to which they would otherwise have turned in the context of the depression era.

Let us reconstruct that forgotten depression-context of over twenty years ago. Starving unemployed masses, embittered to the brink of radical revolution. Unemployed apple vendors at every corner. Hooverville shacks and bonus-marchers dispersed by armed force. Farmers burning mortgages. Workers shot down by company guards or in turn lawlessly taking over factories in sit-down strikes. In short, a revolutionary powder-keg, needing only a spark.

In America the spark never came. Why? All over the rest of the world, the same depression was goading the masses into revolutionary extremes: usually of the communist left, as in France's trade-unions and Front Populaire; sometimes of the radical right, as in Germany. Even sober, evolutionary England felt temporarily the violent passions of class war. The American masses proved the solitary exception to the universal radicalism, meekly letting the New Deal canalize their grievances back into the old, middleclass, parliamentary framework. The New Deal reforms may seem drastic from the smug and prosperous viewpoint of today, but they were small potatoes from the viewpoint

of the economic and psychological desperation of 1933. The confidential Ickes diary of that period has recently reminded us that the only feasible alternative to the New Deal reforms, the mood of the masses being what it was, was not an abandonment of reform, a restoration of business influence, but still more drastic reform, a still more drastic step against business and toward class war.

Normally that still more drastic step would have been taken. The country would have moved not to the right but to the left of Roosevelt. In that case America would today be paralyzed by some kind of radical class-war party as big as that of the communists in France or Italy, making Russia mistress of the globe. During 1933-36, nothing could save the day for conservatism and the traditional status quo, nothing could cheat the revolution of its almost certain triumph, unless the fighting-mad workers, farmers, share-croppers, bonus-marchers could be persuaded to accept Roosevelt's small potatoes instead. Then the miracle happened; the workers were persuaded; the revolutionary moment passed, and today their prosperous sons move into suburbia and ungratefully vote Republican.

If any deception can ever be salutary, then this one was. For neither the workers nor America would be better off if the New Deal had really undertaken the revolutionary chaos and class war that the workers then thought they wanted. A Marxist sleuth may argue: Roosevelt, a Machiavellian opportunist, purposely planned his pseudo-radical gestures in order to deceive the revolutionary workers and steal socialism's thunder. But such Marxist reasoning attributes to the makers of history, whether Roosevelt or any other, qualities they almost never possess: detailed long-range planning; conscious hypocrisy; consistent awareness of their class interests; a capacity for conspiracy sufficiently complicated and ingenious to delight paranoiacs and detective-story fans. Granted that Roosevelt obviously was often a Machiavellian opportunist (with unconscious humor, his cult-

ists employ the daintier adjective "pragmatic"). Yet not even a Machiavellian President is able on purpose to deceive the masses into deeming him anti-business; not even a diabolically clever businessman is able on purpose to feign resentment of a New Deal if he really does know it is rescuing him; history does not work that patly. Both these deceptions rang true for the then anti-capitalist workingman because they were not planned but absent-minded; they rang true because they were *self*-deceptions.

The conspicuousness (elephantine lightness of foot) of several of the capitalist-baiting pro-communists in the New Deal goaded the business world into a sincere—not planned, not feigned—frenzy against the New Deal. This frenzy converted the workers—deceived the workers—into a New Dealism of which they would otherwise have been suspicious as being too moderate. No insincere shadow-boxing, deliberately planned between Roosevelt and Wall Street, could have converted them, deceived them. Sincerity on both sides: the New Deal sincerely deemed itself anti-business; business sincerely deemed the New Deal its enemy and not, as now is so clear, its stabilizer and rescuer. Saved by ignorance: no deliberate capitalist conspiracy but plain ignorance of their respective historical roles caused business and the New Deal to give the masses the impression that the New Deal was as radical as the millionaire Weirs said it was.

This is not to deny the existence of deliberate capitalist plots. But these usually fool nobody, get laughed off the stage, get taken seriously by nobody except Marxists. For example, the so-called "Liberty League" of anti-Roosevelt millionaires fooled nobody with its grand talk of "liberty"; it helped poor, bewildered Landon lose the 1936 election so overwhelmingly. Similarly the Dixon-Yates contract helped the Republicans lose their southern gains of 1952. Capitalist plots sometimes really do occur—and are the enemies not of the workers but of capitalism. The real strength of American capitalist free enterprise, making it superior to rigid statist regimentation, is not its gauche conspir-

acies of selfish materialism but its flexibility, its freedom from doctrinaire theories (in practice even from its own Adam Smith theories), its capacity for voluntary self-reform. Thereby it superbly practices the warning of Prince Metternich to his monarchs: "Stability is not immobility."

Thus it came about that the concealed conservatism of a pseudo-radical New Deal defeated the pseudo-conservatism of the Republican party's concealed radicalism. Roosevelt's thrashing of Old Guard businessmen, before they could provoke the country into class-war, saved them from themselves and doubled their dividends. The world depression of 1929-33 turned the masses of continental Europe toward revolutionary extremes; it would also have done so in America under another Hoover Administration. Instead, the unintentionally conservative New Deal won the worker, the farmer, the share-cropper, the Negro, the unemployed veteran—all who were underprivileged economically or ethnically—away from revolutionary extremes by giving them a real stake in America. For the first time they felt that America was also *their* country. This psychological feeling, not mere economic reform, was the greatest achievement of the New Deal and was, in its consequences, conservative.

The year 1688 killed radicalism and republicanism in England by proving to the Stuart-resenting masses that their aspiration for political liberty could be met—via William III—*within* the traditional monarchic framework; hence, no more need for Cromwellian republican revolution as an alternative to the Stuarts. The year 1933 killed radicalism and communism in America by proving to the plutocrat-resenting masses that their aspiration for economic liberty could be met—via the Squire of Hyde Park—*within* the traditional Constitutional, semi-squirearchical framework; hence, no need for communist or even socialist alternatives to the plutocrats. The day will come when 1933 occupies for American conservatives of the future the same ancient and sacred aura, the same role of basic *starting-*

point, that 1688 has occupied for British conservatives like Burke and Churchill and for America's Federalist party. When that day comes, maturer conservatives than many today will hail the Roosevelt inauguration of 1933 with the same phrase with which Burke hailed the bloodless inauguration of King William III: not as a revolution but as "a revolution averted."

II

IMPORTANT QUALIFICATION: in reacting against the shared Republican and New Deal view that the New Deal was anti-conservative, let us not carry our third view to the opposite extreme of calling the New Deal conservative as a whole. It was conservative—the new 1688—in its substantive aspect: in the revolution-preventing consequences of its reforms and its anti-plutocracy. But its procedural aspect—direct democracy, trying to pack the Court, by-pass the Constitution—was sometimes just as radical as the business world believed it to be. Today Adlai Stevenson, the consolidator of the substantive achievements of the New Deal, is the purifier, pruner, discarder of its procedural defects. His twofold role is to continue liberally its humane social heritage yet to restrict it conservatively within a rigorous procedural framework, not to be subverted even by popular majorities and noble goals.

New conservatives refuse to see the New Deal as black or white; so they alternately get accused of slandering it and over-praising it. They defend its humane reforms as a return to the old medieval sense of a personal, organic relationship between fellow humans, instead of the impersonal, mechanical relationship of cash-nexus that followed the middleclass French Revolution and that lives on today in the Jacobins *endimanchés* of Old Guard Republicanism. So considered, the New Deal has deeper traditional roots than its would-be "traditionalist" critics. This basic acceptance of the New Deal does not prevent new conservatives from attacking its three main unconservative qualities, the

first two radical, the third liberal: first, its above procedural aspect (Court-packing direct-democracy); second, its sometimes excessive statism, depersonalizing and overadjusting the individual; third, its unhistorical liberal faith in human nature and mass progress.

In other words, America needs a government both accepting the New Deal and pruning, purifying it. This dual need would be fulfilled by Stevenson-style Democrats certainly; by Eisenhower-style Republicans very likely; by Old Guard Republicans not at all (they would not accept the New Deal); by doctrinaire ADA-style New Dealers hardly (they would not prune it).

From this picky and choosy approach towards the New Deal, the new-conservative position may seem merely a compromise dependent on the pro and con extremes, merely adding them up and dividing by two. But in reality the new-conservative position towards the New Deal is independently evolved, reflecting a perspective older than either of theirs, that of the *Federalist* papers. This third position has been summarized by the new conservative August Heckscher. His essay "Who Are the American Conservatives?"* refutes the argument according to which those conservatives who support the revolution-preventing New Deal reforms in *politics* become indistinguishable in *philosophy* from liberals and New Dealers and should, therefore, stop calling themselves conservatives:

The failure to understand the true nature of conservatism has made political campaigns in the United States signally barren of intellectual content. In debate it is difficult at best to admit that you would do the same thing as the opposition, but in a different way. Yet the spirit in which things are done really does make a difference, and can distinguish a sound policy from an unsound one. Social reforms can be undertaken with the effect of draining away local energies, reducing the citizenry to an undifferentiated mass, and binding it to the

* In *Confluence* magazine (Harvard University Summer School), September 1954.

shackles of the all-powerful state. Or they can be undertaken with the effect of strengthening the free citizen's stake in society. The ends are different. The means will be also, if men have the wit to distinguish between legislation which encourages voluntary participation and legislation which involves reckless spending and enlargement of the federal bureaucracy.

It is easy to say that such distinctions are not important. A conservative intellectual like Peter Viereck is constantly challenged, for example, because in a book like *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* he supports a political program not dissimilar in its outlines from that which was achieved during twenty years of social renovation under the Democrats. But *the way* reforms are undertaken is actually crucial. Concern for the individual, reluctance to have the central government perform what can be done as well by the state or to have the public perform what can be done as well by private enterprise—these priorities involve values. And *such values*, upheld by writers like Mr. Viereck, are at the heart of modern conservatism. . . . Conservatism at best remains deeper and more pervasive than any party; and a party that does claim it exclusively is likely to deform and exploit it for its own purposes.

As chief editorial writer of the *New York Herald Tribune*, August Hechscher has the greatest editorial influence of any new conservative today. Unlike the present writer, he happens to be a loyal Eisenhower Republican. But he is fair-minded enough to recognize a great conservative statesman when he sees one, even in the opposing camp. Here are Mr. Hechscher's precise reasons for finding none other than Stevenson "the most consistent and philosophically mature conservative . . . in this century":

Conservatism is rarely a program and certainly never a dogma. It is not an ideology. At its best conservatism is a way of thinking and acting in the midst of a social order which is too overlaid with history and too steeped in values, too complex and diverse, to lend itself to simple reforms.

It is a way of thought which not only recognizes different classes, orders, and interests in the social order but actually values these dif-

ferences and is not afraid to cultivate them. . . . So persistent have been the reverberations of this period that many people saw Adlai Stevenson as something close to a radical because he bore the Democratic banner. They failed to discern that he was by all odds the most consistent and philosophically mature conservative to have arisen in this century in either party. Stevenson had to a unique degree a sense of the diversity of which American society is composed. He had a feeling for the way separate groups could be brought into the service of the whole.*

• *Loc. cit.*