
Against Miserablism

(cont. from inside front cover)

By Richard Burke

cynically crow about the “absurdity of reality.” Miserablism is systematically encouraged and spread by capitalism because it is its most powerful weapon against revolt.

That the World-Left has been in a depressed and despairing state of mind for decades is not merely personal observation. Immanuel Wallerstein, originator of “world-systems analysis,” commented on this a decade ago in *The Decline of American Power*. Wallerstein observed that this depressed state could not simply be explained by recent electoral victories by the right and analyzed it as having two main causes: the defeat of the left’s “two-step” strategy pursued for over a century, and the loss of belief in inevitable progress.

The “two-step” strategy Wallerstein refers to

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was what the left had historically seen as its path to success. Step one: take state power, step two: transform the world. The problem is that by the 1960s the World-Left had been quite successful in achieving step one, whether in its Marxist Leninist or Social Democratic approaches, but step two did not happen.

The “actually existing socialist” regimes turned into totalitarian parodies of the idea of socialism. Social Democrats, despite having offered worthy reforms, lost sight of a vision of economic justice and democracy, content to accept capitalism while making it “kinder and gentler.” As a result, the world’s population began to lose faith in the ability of the left to pull off step two.

The second cause, a loss of the belief in inevitable progress, is more subtle and insidious. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the belief in the inevitability of progress is not strictly speaking a left-wing viewpoint, but has historically functioned as an enabling myth for the capitalist world system, and was accepted by left, right, and centrist political currents. This was the idea that the direction of historical time was essentially an ascending arrow, leading to the “good society” sometime in the future. The development of science and technology guaranteed this outcome, and while the present might be dark, the future would necessarily be bright.

The left embodied this optimism perhaps more than the center or right political currents. The early socialists were unabashedly utopian, putting forth plans for social reconstruction which they hoped would, by their very desirability, lead to their adoption on a global scale. Marxism would later appear, ostensibly eschewing utopianism and offering a critique of capitalism instead. Can anyone deny that there was nonetheless an undercurrent of utopian hopes that sustained the Marxist movement? Marxism might avoid explicit utopianism, yet looked forward to communism, a stage of social development based on the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need,” and where the state would wither away, the administration of people abolished by the administration of things.

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Marxism took for granted the inevitability of progress.

This began to change after World War Two, leading to the situation Breton critiqued in the world of art and by extension the larger global society coming into being. The most destructive war in history, the horrors of the holocaust, and above all the development of nuclear weapons contributed to this mind-set. Surrealism, which had dominated the prewar cultural world, was succeeded by existentialism, with its essentially pessimistic view of the *absurd* human condition.

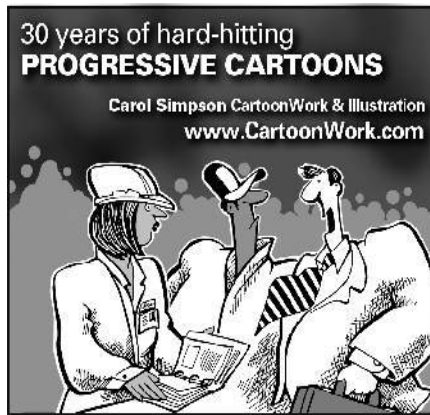
In the 60s, a growing awareness of the ecological limits to growth began to appear. Science and technology, once seen as unquestioned benefactors of human society, were now recognized as being capable of delivering a dystopia as well as a utopia, or perhaps even the extinction of the human race itself. Existentialism was succeeded by Postmodernism, with its rejection of “grand narratives,” a despair over the existence of Truth itself, and a rejection of the possibility of progress.

Thus the present depressed situation of the World-Left today. The defeat of the “two-step” strat-

egy is in some ways the most easily remedied of the two causes. The alternative would be a strategy which is not purely statist in orientation, but which complements electoral efforts with direct action and extra-parliamentary struggles. After all, the left has a long, suppressed history of advocating decentralized and self-managed approaches to socialism.

From Syndicalism and Guild Socialism to "Parecon" and Participatory Planning, any number of models has been offered as an alternative to a centrally planned command economy, or merely Keynesian government management of economic activity. This does not necessarily imply a strictly Anarchist strategy, but the combining of extra-parliamentary struggles with political parties pursuing policies consciously crafted to aid those struggles. Perhaps the problem is one of historical inertia; having placed such an emphasis on statist approaches, the collective intellect of the World-Left is still dominated by those who placed their hopes in these strategies.

The second cause is somewhat harder to address. "Inevitable progress," while not a strictly left-wing idea, played a major role in providing a sense of optimism which sustained the left. At times it could be a profoundly depoliticizing idea. After all, if the future



and it is precisely in such periods that individual and collective action has the possibility of changing things. The choice before us for the middle of this century is between two possible world-systems, one which attempts to maintain the hierarchies and inequalities of capitalism in a new form, and one which is more democratic and egalitarian. Environmentalists should take note that it is precisely the ecological crisis that Wallerstein sees as one of the factors leading to the end of capitalism.

Yet there is a further problem for the World-Left, which Wallerstein's analysis leaves unaddressed. This is that the left has become a movement of people who pride themselves on being hardheaded realists. Now hardheaded realists are very good at analysis and critique, but lousy at offering visions of an alternative. Even worse, they find it logically and psychologically impossible to avoid philosophies of despair. Doing so undermines the hardheaded realist philosophy they pride themselves on! This is problematic for a movement for social change. After all, human beings have put up with conditions of despair and misery for thousands of years, yet only occasionally do they revolt against this situation.

The real question is not why they don't revolt, but why they at times do. The answer is that people revolt when they become convinced that it is possible to succeed; that they can really change their condition. Now just how successful will a depressed, despairing movement of miserablism moaning that "we're all doomed, we can't win" really be in inspiring such revolts? Creating a democratic, libertarian, socialist alternative is a project that will involve a great deal of effort and work. These efforts will not succeed in gaining wider support in the absence of an optimistic, even utopian, attitude on the part of the World-Left.

This is the challenge that the World-Left faces in the coming years: to learn to value imagination, intuition, and the ability to inspire even more than the ability to analyze and reason. Not to reject reason and

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would inevitably be better than the past, then what is the need for activist work? The loss of this belief is nonetheless profoundly demoralizing; yet here, too, we could look to the past for clues to ways to get out of our present dilemma.

Charles Fourier, the Utopian Socialist most beloved by surrealists, had a philosophy of history with ascending and descending arcs. For Fourier, history since the appearance of the human race was on a descending arc, one which would end with the adoption of his schemes for social reform and initiate an ascending arc of history that would last for 80,000 years. Gustav Landauer, the anarchist thinker who nonetheless accepted the post of minister of education in the Munich Soviet Republic at the end of the First World War, rejected the belief in inevitable progress, yet advocated that, "Socialism need not come...but Socialism can come and should come, when we wish it."

In more contemporary times, Immanuel Wallerstein has advocated a view that progress is not inevitable, but is possible. His world-systems analysis recognizes the reality of cycles in history, but because no cycle returns to its exact starting point, there is nonetheless a "secular drift" which insures that no world-system is immortal. In his view, we are coming to the end of the capitalist world-system's life cycle,

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evidence, for these too are absolutely necessary, but not sufficient. We must learn the wisdom of valuing creativity over critique, of optimism over pessimism. There are, ultimately, such things as self-fulfilling prophecies. Miserablism is such a self-fulfilling prophecy, one which will undermine all efforts to prove that "another world is possible." To be successful in its political aims the World-Left must purge miserablism from its collective heart and mind!

R. Burke is an activist, artist, writer, and teacher living in St. Louis.