

ON THE RISE AND DECLINE OF TOTALITARIAN LIBERALISM: SCHLESINGER, BELL, LAROCHE

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In the view of the nascent New Left, "totalitarian liberalism" is a doctrine of social and political consensus that expounds the ideas of the "open society" and "pluralism" in such a way that, paradoxically, critical thought is regarded as subversive and fearful. In particular, totalitarian liberalism has produced a general aversion to the ideas of social class division and class conflict. The post-World War II formulation of the doctrine of totalitarian liberalism, was converted into a set of norms and values and became part of a political culture that excluded the idea of social class and precluded the perception of social class. In the 1960s, the "liberal" political perspective, which then dominated public discourse, began to be considered as an authoritarian doctrine by a significant number of people. The theoretical critique of totalitarian liberalism made by Norman Mailer, Herbert Marcuse, Carl Ogelsby, and others in the turbulent 1960s¹ has lessened in intensity over the past decade and a half; however, it remains relevant. The continuing disintegration of the cultural matrix that now best represents "liberalism" is an outstanding fact of political life in the United States today, but how did the Right, seemingly excluded from serious ideological debate when the New Left focused its arguments against the liberals, come to dominate the political scene early in the 1970s? The leading premise of this essay is that knowing the method by which totalitarian liberalism was able to impose its hegemony over political discourse in the United States is essential to understanding how new authoritarian movements profited from the decline of liberal consensus.

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The Rise of Totalitarian Liberalism

The liberal "consensus" that has dominated political culture in the United States since World War II emerged in response to the ideological polarization of American political life in the 1930s. We have only to note the emergence or rapid growth of radical organizations and social movements such as the Communist and Socialist parties, the Liberty League, the Silver Shirts, the Black Legion, Huey Long's "Share-Our-Wealth" movement, and Charles Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, for example, to understand that the nihilism and resignation that overtook so much of American society in the 1920s had come to a definite end. The relative quiescence of the population was radically disturbed as the structural weaknesses of the domestic economy undermined respect for national political leaders, thus increasing the appeal of "radical" explanations of the crisis. The policies of the New Deal brought only temporary respite from the worse effects of the economic crisis. During the last years of the 1930s, the labor movement grew more and more militant, Roosevelt lost support from the business community, and the "radical" organizations gained strength. Only the advent of World War II curtailed an increase of social conflict.

After the war, a new outbreak of ideological struggle was expected by political and business "leaders," since economic production declined as returning soldiers swelled the ranks of the unemployed and the "radical" organizations were no longer constrained to the support of the national government in the face of foreign aggression. Yet, how could the wartime "consensus" be preserved in this new situation? The answer was simple: wartime conditions must be created. This was especially necessary in light of the Republican-dominated Congress's provocation of the Left and the labor unions. Most dramatically, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 was a challenge which dared workers and radicals to break the law prohibiting spontaneous strike activity — the kinds of strikes that had led to the creation of the CIO only a decade before. Such strikes had been repressed during the last years of Roosevelt's government, but now it was no longer possible to justify such repression by the war effort.

The Taft-Hartley Act was part of a policy which combined international and domestic concerns. First, the Marshall Plan, the Bretton Woods conference, and the "cold war" strategies of the "containment" of Communism throughout the world required the continuation of the war economy. Second, a policy of the domestic "containment" of "un-American" elements was also carried out in order to reduce social and political criticism to a minimum. The spiritual justification for the wartime sacred union was "anti-fascism"; the consensus would form around the issue of "anti-totalitarianism." Having helped to vanquish Nazi imperialist expansion, the Soviet Union became associated with its mortal enemy in the amalgam that the "totalitarian" category was designed to create. The Soviet Union, some claimed, represented a kind of "red fascism" that necessitated an indefinite

prolongation of the crusade to preserve the free world. This effort was all the more urgent, given the alleged presence of totalitarians in key areas of American government.

The rapidity with which the American political landscape was changed was remarkable. Only two years after the great strike wave of 1946 and a year after the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, the president of the CIO was claiming that "we have no classes in this country," thus implying that those believing contrariwise were un-American in some way.² Simultaneously, the creation of a consensus designed to reinforce "pluralist" institutions in the "free world" was immeasurably facilitated by the patriotic activities of individuals like Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Joseph McCarthy as they strove instinctively to expose totalitarians and bring them to justice. Exemplary punishments such as those meted-out to Alger Hiss, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, and others less celebrated were a sober warning to all who would aid the totalitarians by criticizing the "American system" or the "American way of life." The social and cultural conformism and relative lack of ideological debate during the 1950s was striking then and is still a source of nostalgia. So successful was the creation of the consensus, that many intellectuals of the period believed it expressed the very essence of American culture. Historians and other social scientists sought to demonstrate that all of North-American history led to the creation of the crowning consensus. The social conflicts of the past were only birth pangs in the emergence of a conflict-free nation that, in Louis Hartz's terms, was "born free."³

If any single work can be said to be a manifesto linking anti-totalitarianism to the idea of democratic consensus, it is Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949). As advertized on the book's dust-jacket, Schlesinger opposed "the totalitarian state — whether Fascist or Communist" and advocated "a revitalization of our faith in Freedom, a resurgence of the middle way." Above all, Schlesinger wished for a stabilization in American political life, or rather he wished to avoid a return to the passionate ideological debates of the 1930s. Son of a member of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal "brain trust," his allegiances were to the "liberal establishment," the corporate and financial interests of the North-East of the United States. His essential message was simple: the only stable government is one that does not attempt to remake society in light of a utopian vision. The conflicts of the 1930s involving the violent interaction of opposed utopian schemes — fascism and communism — inevitably degenerated into "totalitarianism." The lessons of those years have led to "an unconditional rejection of totalitarianism and a reassertion of the ultimate integrity of the individual" which "constitutes the unique experience and fundamental faith of contemporary liberalism."⁴

A key concept in the new ideology of liberal consensus is a view of the "political spectrum" that graphically shows how the "extremes meet." "Left" and "Right" should not be considered as opposite points on a

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straight line, but rather as the opposed sides of a circle, and this became the political "spectrum" that structured the thinking of a generation during the post-war period. Through the use of this heuristic, the further left one goes, the closer one approaches the right, and vice-versa. Thus, in order to retain a maximum degree of stability, it was vital to remain in the center. The idea that "extremes meet" was offered as an explanation for the similarities exhibited by the fascist regimes and Stalinist Communism. The essence of these systems was "totalitarianism." More than a question of the form of government, it was maintained, there was evidently a psychological factor, an impulse that relegated the specific content of ideology to a secondary position. There was, explained Schlesinger, an "essential kinship among all totalitarians" that was revealed by the fact that "the passage from the extreme left to the extreme right and back has been fast and easy."⁵ This was, he continued, a "fear of isolation," a "flight from anxiety."⁶ An inability to deal with complicated situations, for which there was perhaps no elegant or completely just solution, was the psychological pulsion that may have led some people to adopt extreme ideas. They simply could not accept reality.

By reducing his opponents' ideas to a question of individual psychopathology, Schlesinger was able to amalgamate the Left and the Right and justify the dismissal of any real consideration of the content of "extremist" social philosophy. A certain number of reflections must be made in relation to this approach, however. First, Schlesinger's dismissal of social claims and the content of anti-capitalist theory, by characterizing them as simply tributary to psychopathology on an individual level, was nothing new. The uniqueness of his approach was to virtually deny any difference between the "pathologies" of the two political "extremes." Second, and more importantly, the success of Schlesinger's simplistic and reductionist arguments in crystallizing support for the emerging post-war "consensus" indicates that conditions existed that were conducive to its acceptance.

What were these conditions? Why did alternative visions of the social environment, focused upon relations of domination and exploitation, suddenly cease to find a receptive audience? Schlesinger's arguments were compelling, not because of their intrinsic logic, but because of the political climate of the immediate post-war period. The "sacred union," adhered to so devotedly by the Communist Party of the United States and wartime controls over strike activity muted social criticism. Concurrently, in reaction to the progressive tendencies manifest during the New Deal period, the reactionary Right had already succeeded in setting-up the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938, followed by the Smith Act in 1940. Thus, the repressive atmosphere which flourished during the immediate post-war years was carefully nurtured during the pre-war period and reinforced during the "anti-fascist crusade." In addition, many of the intellectuals who either had or would have had played an affirmative role in the

New Deal, participated in the national war effort as officers in the newly organized intelligence corps, the Office of Strategic Services, that would evolve into the Central Intelligence Agency by 1947. If, therefore, the leading academic intellectuals were primarily concerned with social and economic questions during the 1930s, after World War II they became more oriented towards questions of international hegemony abroad and ideological consensus in the US. The feeling of omnipotence that accompanied the successful intervention of the US in the world war was manifest, on the popular level, as a reinforced national-chauvinism and, on the elite level, as a will to secure positions of power and to reject challenges to their ascendancy.

The new "liberals" were not at all distressed by the red-baiting and persecutions of the Left in general. Long before *The Vital Center* was published, and three months before Schlesinger published the newspaper article that preceded it,⁷ prominent liberals had drawn the lines of the new ideological offensive. In January 1948, William O. Douglas, former Wall Street lawyer and the most "liberal" of Supreme Court Justices throughout most of the post-war period, articulated the new liberalism in language that George Lipsitz has called "chilling." "While the aim of European political parties has been to draw men of different ideologies into separate groups," Douglas explained before a CIO convention, "the aim of our parties has been to unite divergent groups into one. That means compromise of various ideas and ideologies and the doctrinaire acceptance of none. It means the elimination of extremists both Right and Left, and the development of middle of the road policies."⁸ The only question remaining, apparently, was how the so-called "extremists" would be eliminated.

In spite of Schlesinger's apparent equanimity about spurning the Left and the Right in favor of the "vital center," it was the Left that he wished eliminated from the picture. For him, and regardless of the meeting of the "extremes" in the shadow world of psychopathology, the Left represented the greatest danger to the established power structure. If the business-oriented Right was simply too incompetent to govern alone, the "progressives" of the Left were the dangerous dupes of the totalitarians, as he indicates in the following passage:

In this book I have deliberately given more space to the problem of protecting the liberal faith from Communism than from reaction, not because reaction is the less threat, but because it is the enemy we know, whose features are clearly delineated for us, against who our efforts have always been oriented. It is perhaps our very absorption in this age-old foe which has made us fatally slow to recognize the danger on what we carelessly thought was our left — forgetting in our enthusiasm that the totalitarian left and the totalitarian right meet at last on the murky grounds of tyranny and terror. I am persuaded that the restoration of business to political power in this country would have the calamitous results that have gener-

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ally accompanied business control of the government; that this time we might be delivered through the incompetence of the right into the hands of the totalitarians of the left. But I am persuaded too that liberals have values in common with most members of the business community — in particular, a belief in a free society — which they do not have in common with the totalitarians.⁹

This statement effectively summarizes Schlesinger's political perspective. In fact, the "totalitarian right" posed no danger in the US ("...our social situation makes the rise of fascism unlikely")¹⁰ and the business community was merely incompetent. The Republican administrations of presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover were obviously the foremost examples in Schlesinger's mind. Was not the Great Depression brought-on by their lack of economic foresight? His was not, in fact, a serious criticism of "business." On the one hand, charges of incompetence are the most standard and inoffensive political fare. On the other hand, "business" is not only represented politically by the "right," but equally by "liberals" of Schlesinger's orientation. In reality, Schlesinger was cutting-off any remaining ties between the "liberals" of the New Deal and those socialists and communists who had lent such valuable support to the Roosevelt administration and who supported Henry Wallace's progressive third party in the elections of 1948.

The rapid taming of the CIO and the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act successfully contained the labor movement in an institutional straitjacket; now was the time to purge the political community of all those whose social idealism would leave the "liberals" open to the charge that they were socialist stalking horses. The transformation of liberalism was indeed characterized by hypocrisy and disloyalty, and certainly more on the part of the witch-hunters than on that of their victims. At the time, Dalton Trumbo, member of the persecuted "Hollywood Ten," explained clearly that, while numerous New Deal liberals retained their principles intact, "most of the late president's companions, deprived of courage and even of identity by his death, h[u]ng on in a pitiable state of suspension, 'half indoors, half out of doors,' sniffing every breeze that blows and unwilling to fight for anything but their share of the load."¹¹ Trumbo clearly considered Schlesinger, this "inflamed grenadier of the cold war," as a bad leading actor in the unfolding drama that broke so many careers and lives. As he remarked ironically, "From the chilly heights of three years at Harvard, where he holds an associate professorship in the department in which his father occupies, the Francis Lee Higginson chair of history, Mr. Schlesinger hurled the epithet 'wretched nonentities' at three University of Washington professors who, combining sixty-six years of university teaching in their total experience, had been discharged — two for stating they were Communists, one for saying he had been."¹² In effect, Schlesinger served notice to the reactionaries that the "liberals" would not interfere in the witch-hunts that furthered so well the ambitions of numerous post-war

politicians. The elimination of socialists and left-liberals from the political landscape would, from every perspective, reinforce the authority of the ruling elites.

Enforcing "Consensus"

Between the appearance of Schlesinger's book in 1949 and the successful conclusion of Senator Joseph McCarthy's dirty work in 1954, totalitarian liberalism had effectively established its ideological hegemony. Alger Hiss and many others were in jail because of their dubious "associations" or opinions. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were dead. Social idealists, unwilling to be intimidated into silence, lost their jobs, and the Communist Party of the USA was at times outlawed. This was the primary work of consensus-building. Political debate had not ceased, however, the variety of opinions that could be expressed was seriously reduced. The essence of consensus was not that virtually all parties agreed on basic principles, but that only certain parties had the right to express an opinion. The "liberal consensus" did not express the "open society," but rather the closed mind.

Restructuring political culture and social consciousness was not only an affair of political theory. It was performed in a wide variety of cultural areas and at all levels of the social structure. For example, Serge Guilbaut has documented in convincing detail how the rapid emergence of New York in the late 1940s as the center of a new aesthetic movement, abstract expressionism, was in great part the consequence of a politically motivated plan to lay the foundations of American hegemony in the art world, and over cultural attitudes in general. The connivance of wealthy contributors, museum directors, artists, politicians, and diplomats successfully created the illusion that the United States was a veritable crucible of avant-garde creativity when, in fact, artists who did not conform to the new orthodoxy, especially those who continued the socially engaged art of the Depression years, were quickly excluded from the scene. By 1951, Guilbaut concluded: "an art that saw itself as stubbornly apolitical came to be used as a powerful political instrument."¹³ Consequently, the United States was able to maintain its reputation for openness and modernity as it moved into the open repression of the McCarthy years.

For the general public, a complicated infrastructure of state propaganda was constructed. In the late 1930s, committees on foreign relations were formed in order to influence local elites on issues of foreign policy, and these committees were particularly active in the immediate post-war years. The Advertising Council was formed during World War II in order to promote a positive image of corporate business; it intervened whenever there seemed to be a danger of public outcry against business or industrial practices. Since 1949 government and industry have collaborated in the establishment and funding of "information" agencies such as the Joint Council on Economic Education, founded to educate teachers in the teaching of

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economics. G. William Domhoff has painstakingly documented this complicated network of agencies, foundations, and "think tanks" and the different levels on which such organizations operate in their efforts to indoctrinate the population.¹⁴

The tenor of political life in the 1950s is well known, therefore a detailed description of the conformism and de-politicization that resulted from repression and intimidation during the immediate post-war period is, in this context, unnecessary. The outstanding characteristic of the period is the rupture that was effected between the "Old Left" and the "New Left" of the 1960s. By the late 1950s, Daniel Bell had concluded that the "ideologies" that impassioned people in the 1930s and before were simply "exhausted." He maintained that, from 1930 to 1950, events put an end "to chiliastic hopes, to millenarianism, to apocalyptic thinking — and to ideology. For ideology, once a road to action, ha[d] become a dead end."¹⁵

Schlesinger's manifesto had at that point become dogma. Ideological struggle had become a thing of the past. The only dissenters seemed to be the ineffectual, comical "beatniks," who had recently found their mass-media figure in the person of Jack Kerouac — as unstable and as a-political a spokesman as could be desired by the advocates of consensus. Among all serious commentators on political affairs there was little questioning of social relations or the political power structure: there was "a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues: the acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism. In that sense, too, the ideological age has ended."¹⁶

The enormous success of Bell's book must be understood within the context of conformity and intellectual repression created by the "containment" of the anti-capitalist left and underwritten by the rising industrial productivity of the early post-war period. Political conflicts were effectively resolved by formal and informal means of repression, while social conflicts were attenuated by the cooptation and institutionalization of labor unions and the reinforcement of "consumerism" allowed by US world economic hegemony. The "McCarthyist" repression was, however, a bit embarrassing for the ideologues of the "open society." How could legal intimidation, blacklists, and the generalized persecution of social critics be explained if the "consensual" society was indeed the best of all political worlds? Daniel Bell offered an explanation of the phenomenon based upon the idea that class differences were disappearing in the United States. As the "middle class" continued to expand, incorporating hitherto marginalized groups, the nation experienced temporary social tensions. The excesses of the immediate post-war period were due to the "status anxieties" of new groups that were being assimilated into active political life. McCarthy and others represented the small towns, small farmers, the little men in general, who lacked the political and philosophical sophistication

of the Eastern intellectuals. Once again, the "birth pangs" of the American Dream! As he explained:

The new divisions, created by the status anxieties of new middle-class groups, pose a new threat. The rancors of McCarthyism were one of its ugly excesses. However, the United States, so large and complex that no single political boss or any single political group has ever been able to dominate it, will in time undoubtedly diminish these divisions, too. This is an open society, and these anxieties are part of the price we pay for that openness.¹⁷

The use of the pronoun "we" might have seemed somewhat cavalier to Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and the others who were broken in one way or another by the "excesses" of the post-war repression.

Particularly striking in the pronouncements of the ideologues of consensus, is the ease with which they maintained a tone of reasoned moderation while advancing the most outrageous lies. Can it be stated otherwise when we read that the years of outright political persecution revealed the existence of an "open society," that a political class working assiduously to eliminate the expression of certain opinions were the foremost champions of "pluralism," and that the act of tarring all varieties of socialist expression with the "totalitarian" brush was the best way to achieve an enlightened polity?

Daniel Bell was aware of such objections. He made clear that, in spite of certain contradictions, a "liberal society must indeed tolerate dissent." As proof that the political class in the United States was tolerant of criticism, Bell referred to the existence of a radical, social-democratic magazine called *Dissent*. Was it not tolerated? For him, the presence of such a periodical revealed both the openness and the integrative power of American society. Not only were the contributors of *Dissent* consistently critical of American institutions, but they were generally former marxists who had moderated their views. In addition, many of them were professors at the elite universities which represented liberal university culture in the US: "To that extent, and this is the final paradox, even *Dissent* is an accredited member of that culture, and a welcome one." Indeed, these "dissenters," "the generation of the thirties, [were] prodigal sons who, in terms of American culture, had returned home." Bell was quick to add, somewhat vaguely, that "this may well have been the last radical generation for a time."¹⁸

Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* appeared eleven years before the publication of Bell's *End of Ideology*. The former was a manifesto for the new ideology of consensus, while the latter was the celebration of its imagined success. Although the tones of the books were different, they shared the same assumptions and political intent: to discredit "un-American" varieties of social criticism by positing the existence of totalitarianism, a concept which combined the external threat with the enemy within. The argument ran as follows: the basis of the totalitarian impulse was a lack

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of psychological equilibrium in the individual, a fear of ambiguity, and an irrational desire for social perfection. Political pluralism and the democratic consensus that expressed it reflected a sober and sophisticated political culture that was contrary to the extremist, utopian impulse. "Extremism" was the individual symptom of political malaise. Bell made a particular effort to reveal how extremism and personal instability were linked, especially in the intellectual. Since "the intellectual takes his *self* as a starting point and relates the world to his own sensibilities," he is always in danger of a subite change of orientation.¹⁹ In Bell's estimation, the whole "generation of the thirties" revealed this syndrome, as did numerous European social thinkers.

The emergence of the ideology of consensus was primarily the expression of a profound rupture in the evolution of political culture in the United States. Nevertheless, the development cannot be said to have been merely the sudden elevation of a new class of intellectuals. Certainly an identifiable group of intellectuals were responsible for the formulation and the propagandizing of the myth of consensus, but this work had to be done in opposition to other intellectuals who were also formed politically during the 1930s. Generational considerations cannot be ignored, but generations should not be considered as a "block." The form and content of political articulation is structured by the complex of social forces at a given historical moment. During the years of economic crisis, social conflict was so acute as to create profound divisions with the ruling elites, on the one hand, while on the other, force concessions from the more reactionary and uncompromising of these elites. The eventual containment of the revitalized socialist Left and the renewed elan of the labor movement caused a rapid shift to the Right. This was explained, by those intellectuals willing to modify their orientations, more as a maturation of the society as a whole rather than as a change in their own ideas. The elimination of the socialist Left was thus presented as a natural stabilization of the polity, the withering away of the extremes of the political spectrum. In reality, only the socialist Left was weakened in this process. The reactionary Right was reinforced by institutional innovations (the Smith Act, Taft-Hartley Act, etc.), by electoral shifts (the 1946 legislative elections which resulted in a Republican-dominated Congress), and by a change in the political climate created by the wartime "sacred union."

This process was accelerated by the disenchantment of communist intellectuals with the CPUSA and the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. Even before the Nazi-Stalin Pact of 1939, the conspiratorial and authoritarian methods of the CP and the increasing volume of revelations about the actual conditions in the USSR disillusioned a growing number of formerly idealistic intellectuals. Many of these people became ideologues of the reactionary right. If the "neo-liberal" ideologues of consensus benignly tolerated the "excesses" of "McCarthyism," the new "conservative" ideologues, many of them former trotskyists or members of the CPUSA, were active

supporters and collaborators of the witch-hunters. This dramatic conversion of a significant number of left, "marxist" intellectuals into virulent "anti-communists" gave credence to the idea of "extremism" after the war, and to the idea that a certain psychological disposition made the extremes meet if political ideologies are pursued to their logical limits and realized in the concrete world of human affairs. "The rise of the New American Right out of the ashes of the Old American Left," according to John Diggins, "was one of the great political surprises of our time."²⁰

Obviously, it was more useful to the ideologues of consensus to be surprised by the dramatic conversions of some leftist intellectuals to reactionary political opinions than to take notice of the leftist intellectuals who, despite defeat and disillusionment, remained critical of American capitalism and its institutions. In spite of formal and informal repression, there was a regrouping of independent socialist thinkers which led not only to the creation of the social democratic magazine, *Dissent*, in the early 1950s, but also to the revolutionary socialist, and anti-stalinist *Monthly Review* in 1949. As Diggins states, "there were many veterans of the thirties . . . who experienced the same betrayals and disenchantments of the era and yet continued to sustain a radically critical stance toward American society and American culture."²¹ The constancy of *this* Left, however, was precisely the problem for the ideologues of consensus. The Left had to be eliminated. Ideological struggle was necessary, but on what terms?

As indicated, the chosen terms did not concern either the reformation or qualitative transformation of social relations in the US; they concerned the psycho-pathological impulses behind any essential challenge to the "American system," the central argument being that the *only* alternative was a form of totalitarianism. The rational world of political choice was thereby reduced to an early version of Ronald Reagan's "free world" versus the "evil empire." The emerging consensual newspeak cast all opponents of the "the American way of life" as either active agents or unwitting dupes of totalitarian terror. Indeed, the real "consensus" which emerged after World War II was the tacit accord that existed between the New Deal "liberals" of the Roosevelt years and the reactionaries of the moment (whether traditional members of the business community or leftist intellectuals converted to virulent anti-communism). This was the consensual basis of the "pluralist," "open society" which emerged in the United States after the war. Political idealism was spurned in favor of a certain rationality which had as its major characteristic the systematic elimination of the thinking that did not fit the prevailing "consensus." It was thus absolutely necessary for Daniel Bell to claim that ideologies were "exhausted," that they were, in fact, no longer *worthy* of practical consideration. Himself converted from "marxism" to "neo-liberalism," Bell attempted to reinforce the myth of consensus and avoid a confrontation with the intellectual ghosts of the recent past. His attempt was only partially successful for, when

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his book was published in 1960, the spectre of anti-capitalist "ideology" began to reveal itself again, and with increasing frequency.

Class Consciousness and Cultural Despair

Since the 1960s, the United States has experienced the breakdown of the post-war ideology of consensus. Totalitarian liberalism has had to cope with a real and incompatible pluralism. The emergence of a "New Left" from the ruins of the Old Left and the germination of a New Right occurring between the discrediting of Joseph McCarthy (July 1954) and the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater (1964) shattered the consensus and stranded the politicians whose careers were anchored to the Vital Center.

A major element of this political process has been the increased awareness of social class differences and divisions, this consciousness, however, has not assumed the form or content preconceived by those smitten by a vulgar marxism. While it is true that the new class consciousness has participated in a radicalization of the electorate and of the working classes, the greatest number of workers have as yet only experienced a confusion of social perceptions. Their insecurities and dissatisfactions have led to an increasingly critical disposition towards the social and political environment, but not to a coherent understanding of it. Part of this confusion is due to the defunct liberal consensus itself. The work of discrediting the marxian Left has been so thoroughly accomplished that any usage of socialist terminology immediately conjures images of the Red State, the "marxist society," the "Russian Bear" that has become a nightmare image continually surging forth from the subconsciouses of many North Americans. Such conditioning cannot be overcome in a single generation. As events in recent years have demonstrated, "cold war" rhetoric remains as useful in securing the interests of political and business elites now, as it was in the late 1940s.

The radicalization of two broad groups has occurred in opposition to this legacy. First, the working masses have gradually reassumed a propensity for collective organization and direct action. Emulation of the tactics of the Civil Rights movements and of the student protests against the war in Vietnam has, in fact, revalorized what can only be called "extra-parliamentary" actions. On a popular basis, the meaning of what was called "participatory democracy" in the late 1960s was that you *could* confront city hall. The so-called new social movements and the rank-and-file union movements of the 1970s and 80s express this rejection of "professional" politics. Second, a significant number of intellectuals have firmly rejected the tenets of totalitarian liberalism and now assert the necessity of qualitative social change. It is the combined forces of these two groups which have recreated a political Left in the United States.

Part of any political class consciousness is a deep sense of injustice, of inequities deemed unnatural and unacceptable. The "hidden injuries of class," however, can be expressed without a clear understanding of the hidden *interests* of class. In the 1970s, the Right was able to coopt class resentments by directing them against the "liberal establishment" that came under such deserved fire in the 1960s. Riding the back of the cold-war tiger, the "brightest and the best" of the liberals found that, once they repented for their sins committed in Vietnam, their own anti-communist rhetoric could be turned against them. Similar to Harry Truman, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson, who found themselves on the defensive when faced with a right wing populist named Joseph McCarthy, the arrogant liberals of Camelot, with Arthur Schlesinger as their leader, quickly became the "pin-headed intellectuals" of George Wallace and the "nattering ninnies of negativism" of Spiro Agnew. As advocates of a non-existent consensus, regardless of their academic and corporate connections, the liberals became class enemy number one: agents of a corporate-liberal establishment dedicated to busing children out of their neighborhoods, sending sons to slaughter while continuing to lose the war, and transferring power from the people to the federal bureaucracy. Using these themes, the New Right was able to channel class resentments into a direction supportive of its own projects. In doing so, however, the Right was obliged to reinforce its populist rhetoric and thus contribute to a resurgence of class language. Such a development, incompatible with the ideology of consensus, has the long-term potential of stimulating the development of labor and socialist organization. Consequently, the liberals will continue to be squeezed in their vital center.

The difficulty that liberals have in facing the issue of class has been dramatically revealed in presidential elections over the past twenty years. Hubert Humphrey banked on liberal consensus in 1968, whereas George Wallace spoiled his chances with his populist "blue-collar" and "redneck" campaign. In 1972, George McGovern sought to create a political force out of a coalition of disaffected groups — blacks and civil rights activists, anti-war protestors, a revitalized intellectual Left — but he had no broad class or ideological appeal. In 1976 Jimmy Carter ran an opportunistic campaign that capitalized on the mistakes of the arrogant and reckless Richard Nixon, only to lose in 1980 to the professional populism of his folksy opponent. Carter, of course, was folksy in his own right, but he had just lost another war, this one in Iran, humiliating the United States for the second time in less than a decade. In 1984, a spiritual son of Hubert Humphrey tested the balloon of corporate-liberal consensus once again; its quick deflation was considered merciful by all concerned. No one, however, revealed the bankruptcy of liberalism more brilliantly than Gary Hart. Attempting a diluted version of George McGovern's disastrous campaign (Hart was McGovern's campaign manager), Hart lacked the sincerity that had won respect for McGovern, if not votes. Disregarding the role of class values entirely, he revealed such a total contempt for his intended constituents

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that his campaign was first aborted early in 1987, revived, and then suffocated by voters in the primary elections.

At the present time, only a political appeal based on a consideration of the realities of social class can elicit a positive response from the population as a whole. This situation does not mean that a class-based politics dominates in the United States, but that a growing sense of class, and a growing potential for the emergence of class consciousness on a significantly broader level, has transformed American political life. One of the consequences of this change has been the decline of totalitarian liberalism and the rise of a different authoritarian movement.

The results of totalitarian liberalism has been the rise of neo-fascists like the former trotskyist and New Leftist Lyndon LaRouche. In fact, LaRouche's career is symbolic of a United States careening towards a new kind of authoritarianism. Both LaRouche and the US share elements of consistency and volatility that are perhaps keys to understanding North-American political culture. What we find when we go beneath the surface of the idea of "consensus" is not the active concordance of politically aware individuals, but an absence of political awareness which allows the population to be dominated by relatively small groups of "decision-makers" and "image-makers." That which is to be believed a homogeneity of opinion actually reflects an overwhelming apathy towards civic and world affairs. There has never been a real consensus in the US, only a de-politicization which, far from contributing to civil stability, has created a confused, frustrated, frightened populace. The "individualism," "narcissism," and violence of the population, so often commented upon, are the cultural and characterological consequences of this depoliticization.

The special appeal of totalitarian liberalism was its undauntable optimism — its ability to reinforce a blind faith in the best of all possible worlds where the Spirit of Liberty has been realised in Pure Reason and where all negativity has disappeared. It is equally true, however, that doubts were and continue to be expressed, if only in intuitive ways. David Lynch's recent film, *Blue Velvet*, expresses implicitly such a doubt. The theme of Lynch's film is the rot which has eaten at the core of American culture. He contrasts the empty banality of the American Dream with the raging underworld it conceals. Indeed, the corruption steaming beneath the surface of the middle-class American Dream has been systematically contained by the liberal "consensus" of the post-war period. Not only has the ideology of consensus been the means by which outstanding social problems have been ignored, but it has been the formative agent in the creation of the "one-dimensionality" of the American mind discussed by Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s. An inability to contextualize, an abhorrence of critical thought, an aversion to programmatic responses to social questions, an absence of cultural relativism, a defensiveness born of a profound sense of inferiority, all belonging to the American mentality, were reinforced by the post-war imposition of totalitarian liberalism.

In attempting to understand this phenomenon we refer logically to the rise of the consumer society with all its variants of commodity fetishism, in other words to the cultural configuration of the materially prosperous "market-oriented," capitalist society that fortune erected on a temperate continent provided with resources capable of sustaining myths. The cultural consequences of consumerism, the sophistication of marketing "persuasions," and the oligopolistic control of sources of information are also prime factors in the deadening of critical faculties in the US. In the presence of these phenomena, there often appears to be no political salvation. Regardless of the degree of "political consciousness" possessed by indigenous critics of American culture and institutions, they invariably run into a wall of consensual non-consciousness, a will-not-to-know that is a veritable breeding ground of nihilism, narcissism and sado-masochistic violence. The liberal consensus, which has been *the* political ideology in the US, was consciously fashioned and propagated so as to eliminate any notion of an alternative to the "American way" and any propensity to critical thought in general.

What is generally taken as "extremism" in the U.S., is the opposite of the collective state of political apathy that is maintained by those in positions of power. There are two ways of understanding the phenomenon. First, the relative quiescence and political ignorance of the American population represents an opportunity, a field of action, for "activists." The lack of political consciousness is fertile ground for manipulation based upon the most exaggerated claims. In this sense, apathy tends to encourage "extremism." Second, the presence of "extremists" works to the benefit of those in positions of power and authority who are quick to explain that any deviation from the political orthodoxy of the moment will degenerate into "irrationality" and violence. Social criticism is thus a sign of irresponsibility. In other words, the myth of "consensus" implies the creation of scapegoats. Over the past twenty years individuals like Joseph McCarthy, Lyndon LaRouche, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, etc. have succeeded in imposing themselves upon the public by profiting from the civil apathy and political ignorance of the North-American population through the process of scapegoating. Products of the myth of "consensus," these men have also contributed to its destruction.

What can be expected in the future? It is difficult to be optimistic. To date, the new populism has largely been a purely political response to a population that has been partially disillusioned and has experienced insecurities resulting from rapid industrial mutation, a long-term decline in real income, and an overall increase in unemployment over the past two decades. The class perceptions and tensions which have accompanied these trends have been effectively manipulated through the use of prevailing political structures and the electronic media. The right wing, television evangelicalism is the best example of this manipulation, and it should not be forgotten that the Moral Majority was created out of secular, political mo-

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tives. When recent corporate mergers are taken into consideration, the role of the communications media can be expected to become even more reactionary. There has been a radicalization of American political life in which a recognition of the realities of social class and class divisions has gained increased importance, but, at the present time, the potential for native-grown fascism appears far greater than for any conceivable form of socialism.

Such explanations and prognostications, however, are not complete, and taken alone they may even contribute to cultural despair and to the politics of cultural despair. The situation appears far less hopeless when we take into account the historical specificity of contemporary political culture in the US and the element of political will which contributed to the present situation. What can be done, can be undone. Totalitarian liberalism was not simply secreted by the structural evolution of the American economy and society. It emerged only after an ideological struggle involving a concerted phase of theory-building and political repression. Since World War II, North-American liberals have contributed more than any single group to the creation of these conditions. Their imposition of totalitarian liberalism, primarily involving a rupture in the development of the socialist Left, laid a firm foundation for the rise of more pronounced fascist tendencies in the United States. That class appeals will be made more frequently in American political life, there is little doubt. It is also certain that liberalism of the corporate or "New Deal" order offers no long-lasting solutions to contemporary problems of social existence. Alternatively, it is possible to understand the divisions that perpetuate social inequities, without succumbing to the pitfalls of this specious ideology. The era of consensus is past, and the only civilized alternative is to combat the forces of reaction, whether totalitarian liberalism or fascist authoritarianism, with a class appeal which is not based upon scapegoating of any kind.

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Notes

1. For discussions of how, in the 1960s, post-war liberalism came to be seen as a conservative and authoritarian doctrine see: Ronald Berman, *America in the Sixties : An Intellectual History*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 110-118; Christopher Brookeman, *American Culture and Society since the 1930s*, (London, Macmillan, 1984), pp. 150-170.
2. Philip Murray, *American Magazine*, June 1948, p. 136, cited by George Lipsitz, *Class and Culture in Cold War America: "A Rainbow at Midnight,"* (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 143. Such affirmations were reinforced by scholarly studies such as the in-

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- fluent classic, W. Lloyd Warner *Social Class in America: The Evaluation of Status*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), by W. Lloyd Warner, first published in 1949.
3. See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, (New York: Harcourt, 1955).
 4. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. ix.
 5. Ibid., p. 60.
 6. Ibid., p. 58.
 7. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Not Left, Not Right, but a Vital Center," *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 1948.
 8. William O. Douglas, *Monthly Labor Review*, January 1949, cited in Lipsitz, *Class and Culture*, p. 143.
 9. Schlesinger, "Not Left, Not Right," pp. ix-x.
 10. Ibid., p. 33.
 11. Dalton Trumbo, *The Time of the Toad: A Study of Inquisition in America*, (London & West Nyack: The Journeyman Press, 1982 [1949]), p. 59.
 12. Ibid., p. 43.
 13. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 190.
 14. See G. William Domhoff, "The Ideology Process," in *The Powers That Be, Processes of Ruling Class Domination in America*, (New York: Random House, 1978).
 15. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, (Glencoe, The Free Press, 1960), p. 370.
 16. Ibid., p. 373.
 17. Ibid., p. 112.
 18. Ibid., pp. 289-299.
 19. Ibid., p. 293.
 20. John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual History*, (New York, Harper and Row, 1975,) p. 4. Diggins analyzes how "four gifted but diverse men (Max Eastman, John Dos Passos, Will Herberg, and James Burnham) made the peculiar odyssey from the revolutionary Left to the militant Right, even without pausing in the 'Vital Center.'" See p. 14.
 21. Ibid., p. 430.