THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RADICAL POLITICS

The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics, and Culture in Marxist Theory by Stanley Aronowitz. Praeger. 1981 345 pp. no price listed.

Working Class Hero: A New Strategy for Labor by Stanley Aronowitz. The Pilgrim Press. 1983 228 pp. $18.95.

a review essay by
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These two books by Stanley Aronowitz constitute a useful starting point for a discussion of strategies for social change in the U.S. today. In this essay I will describe their contribution, focusing on his application of Gramsci's concept of a "historic bloc" to the American context and his approach to developing a new labor movement. I will criticize his return to a largely electoral conception of how such a bloc would function and the barely-liberal program he lays out for it. I will suggest instead how American social movements can attempt to create a historic bloc and reset the political agenda without being limited to those actions which the official political structure is willing to tolerate.

The Theoretical Background

The Crisis of Historical Materialism is an extended attack on the kind of Marxism that reduces the world to a simple drama in which the working class becomes conscious of itself and establishes its control over society. It denies that history results from the inevitable working out of laws like those of 19th century science. Aronowitz points out that, the "scientific" predictions of Marxists notwithstanding, the working class has not developed in a revolutionary fashion and that new social forces, first fascism and more recently feminism, environmentalism, and religious movements, have been unanticipated and poorly understood by Marxist "science".

Aronowitz argues that many determinist Marxists have identified with the "project of Western science" whose goal is complete knowledge of the world as the basis for complete control of the world. They have used their claim of unique scientific knowledge to justify domination of the natural and social worlds and to debunk the claims of oppressed gender, racial, and other groups on the grounds that only Marxist class analysis is really scientific. He urges us to abandon the myth of inevitable progress through self-knowledge of the proletariat and instead think of the future as an open field, affected by the past and present but with no determinate goal which it is tending to realize.

The Non-Centrality of Class

Aronowitz rejects the version of Marxism which views economic class as the unique determiner of society. Applying this approach to the U.S., Aronowitz argues that other oppressed groups cannot be aggregated to the working class. The position of Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, women, the unemployed, and the handicapped is shaped not only by their class position in relation to the means of production but by sexism, racism, ageism, and other realities which cannot be reduced to economics. By claiming a unique role in social progress for the industrial working class, Marxism tends to legitimate the claims of this group and undermine those of other groups, such as women and minorities, who have been excluded by the dynamics of capitalism and previous social systems from the industrial workforce. Marxism's scientific pretentions amount to a claim to

be the "master dialogue" of human liberation. But in fact, it is only one such dialogue, which must be content with running parallel to liberatory dialogues based on ethnic, gender, and even religious rather than class identities.(2)

Aronowitz' long and rather rambling discussion of Marxist theory has a valuable moral: If Marxism is to make a contribution to human liberation today, it must be shorn of its deterministic and domineering tendencies.

The "Historic Bloc"

The principal idea Aronowitz brings from his theoretical discussions to the questions of political practice is Gramsci's notion of the "historic bloc". For Gramsci, a bloc is something more than a coalition in which different groups agree to support a particular demand; it is a stable, long-term collaboration built up around a program which meets the needs of each by shaping certain basic structures of society. The New Deal, for example, created a bloc of labor, blacks, ethnic groups, and a fraction of capital (referred to in American political parlance as the "New Deal Coalition") based on Keynsian economic policies, global expansionism, and the welfare state; it persisted for nearly half-a-century.

Aronowitz' strategy for the left today is to form an opposition bloc to replace the old New Deal coalition, one in which the needs of minorities, women, workers, people of conscience, and those who want the world to have a future are integrated into a program of social change.

On the basis of his theoretical analysis of determinism and class, Aronowitz specifically rejects Gramsci's notion that such a bloc should be based on the hegemony of one group, the working class, which provides the leadership and integrating ideology for all members of the bloc. Rather, each of the groups which participates in the bloc should draw on its own culture, conduct its own dialogue, and participate in the bloc on its own terms.

The Labor Movement

Aronowitz sees a new labor movement as an important part of such a bloc, and Working Class Hero is largely devoted to an interesting and I believe largely valid interpretation of American labor and the conditions for its transformation. Aronowitz presents Samuel Gompers as the key figure in the development of the 20th century labor movement, the representative of the dominance of the skilled craftsmen and their hierarchically-oriented culture within the labor movement. Even when technology and scientific management broke their hold on production, the craftsmen continued to dominate the labor movement by means of their domination of the cultural assumptions of the "working class public sphere."

Gompers initially advocated a "pure and simple unionism" in which unions operated exclusively in civil society, neither influenced by nor attempting to influence the state. But the overwhelming power of corporate America, combined with the willingness of a segment of the capitalist leadership to cooperate with labor, led Gompers to formulate a strategy -- dubbed by Aronowitz "social contract unionism" -- which has dominated the labor movement to the present day. Labor would cooperate politically with the progressive wing of capitalism, represented first by the National Civic Federation and later by the Wilson Administration. In turn it would be guaranteed the right to organize and bargain collectively within narrowly-drawn limits which left unchallenged the owners' rights to run their businesses. Gompers saw that this strategy could provide gains for the skilled elite in the context of an expanding national economy and a growing U.S. imperium.

This framework collapsed in the 1920s as the progressive wing of capital lost power, corporations drove unionism out of the workplace, and the defeat of craft power was consolidated by new production processes and management structures. From the rubble emerged the new industrial union movement of the 1930s, which again joined hands politically with the liberal wing of the corporate leadership as organized in the New Deal. This alliance constituted a "historic bloc" of progressive capitalists, labor, ethnic groups, and minorities that dominated U.S. politics into the 1970s.

The industrial unionism of the CIO abandoned the craft orientation of the AFL but retained and extended the class collaboration of "social contract unionism". It

made an alliance with the New Deal fraction of capital around a program of social reform and legal collective bargaining rights. This basic class compromise was solidified in the 1950s by union contracts which forbade union interference in corporate financial decisions but provided an "annual improvement factor" guaranteeing workers a share of economic growth. Even within industrial unionism, the assumptions of discourse were shaped by the hierarchical traditions of craft and the institutional dominance of skilled workers: it was no accident that an old-time craft unionist like George Meany should be the spokesman of organized labor for a quarter-century.

Undergirding the rise of the CIO had been the development of a new "working class public sphere" in the major industrial regions created by industrial concentration. In the decades following World War II, however, this cultural formation was dissipated by suburbanization and industrial de-concentration. Meanwhile, large numbers of women, blacks, and recent immigrants entered the labor force, while white collar, clerical, service, public, and professional workers increased enormously as a proportion of all workers. A labor culture still dominated by male skilled manual workers was alien to these groups, and they remained outside the "house of labor". The working class public sphere rapidly declined, making possible the isolation and decimation of the labor movement, the defeat of the New Deal coalition, and the rise to dominance of the Right.

Aronowitz' "New Strategy for Labor"

The global economic crisis of the 1970's and '80's and the rise of international competition have made the continuation of the class compromise impossible. Employers have taken advantage of labor's weakness to seek concessions and even to break unions. The labor movement now can survive only if it can find an alternative policy.

For Aronowitz, the basic elements of this policy are the organization of workers outside the current scope of blue-collar unionism into new unions; the rejection by labor of corporate economic growth as the ultimate criterion of social policy; the consequent shift of labor from political collaboration with part of capital to political opposition; its formation of an oppositional bloc with women, minorities, and other oppositional groups; and the embodiment of this bloc in a program and a political vehicle.

This proposal for a "new strategy for labor" is grounded in three recent trends in American society. In an era of global economic stagnation, mass unemployment, and easy international capital mobility, normal collective bargaining can no longer deliver the goods -- "social contract unionism" is providing only layoffs, givebacks, and deteriorating conditions on the job.(3) The rise of the Right and the devolution of the New Deal coalition have eliminated the alliance with the progressive wing of capital as a viable option at least for the time being. The rise of new social movements, such as those of women, blacks, third-world minorities, and environmentalists, and new groups of workers, such as those in the secondary labor market on the one hand and the burgeoning technical and professional workers on the other, have made traditional industrial workers only a minority among those who might challenge the status quo.

Aronowitz points out that the major gains in organization in the past decades have emerged out of and have reflected the cultures of those groups -- such as the black- and Hispanic-based drives of the hospital workers union 1199 and the politically progressive, professionally-oriented expansion of the AFT.(4) He argues for new forms of unionism that would reflect both the cultures and the work structures of such groups. For those in secondary labor markets, this would entail supporting the cultural leadership of oppressed communities, a membership and bargaining structure adapted to casualized labor markets, and political leadership on issues of undocumented workers, discrimination, and other problems affecting the underclass. For professional and technical workers self-management and shop-floor democracy would have to become important themes.

The first step of building such new union forms would be to "identify the organizers who, in the classical mode, are people steeped in their communities who are willing to become part of the labor movement as well." Taking a page from such groups and Working Women and Union Wage, their organizations might focus at first less on traditional union contract demands

than on sexual harassment, child care facilities, etc. "Organizing among the new workers may take the form of small professional, feminist, and civil rights groups before trade union organization becomes possible." In high-turnover workforces, "occupational communities may be more important for organizing than communities based on a single workplace."

Of central importance would be the educational and cultural role these unions would play. They would develop a working class public sphere with a political discourse that went beyond the framework of social contract unionism to make fundamental social change discussible and to include all kinds of working people, not just male white industrial workers, in the conception of "labor". They would fight vigorously not just for the immediate interests of their members, but for the broad social interests of the bloc as a whole. Indeed, the membership of such unions would be composed largely of the constituent parts of that bloc.

Political Strategy

Aronowitz sees the bloc as a whole establishing for itself a "political vehicle" but does little to define what it might be beyond saying that "the vehicle may be a political party in which labor occupies a major position of power, or a political alliance with other social movements that uses the Democratic Party as an arena." He argues that the development of such a vehicle depends on resolving the "ideological and programatic" issues facing the new partners. Above all, it requires that a segment of the labor movement break with "social contract unionism" and move into more fundamental opposition to the status quo. Aronowitz recognizes that "The new political bloc will attract only a fraction of organized labor" and will meet opposition from the rest.

The elements of such a bloc can already be seen in the various community/labor alliances, support committees, and "rainbow coalitions" that have emerged around the country in the past few years. But difficult problems of strategy and program need to be addressed if the potential of such a bloc is to be realized.

Electoralism

In The Crisis of Historical Materialism, Aronowitz wrote, "The aspiration to control the state by parliamentary or other means is, in the end, a Jacobin goal, not one consistent with an emancipatory socialism... Modern left-parliamentary politics may aggregate desire, but it tends to suppress its extra-parliamentary expressions... The contemporary task of parliamentary socialism is to make marginal all movements at the base which implicitly or explicitly renounce this mode of aggregation." In Working Class Hero, however, any questions regarding such possible implications of electoral action appear to have been forgotten; Aronowitz instead criticizes the view of "the state and politics as constraints to be overcome rather than legitimate arenas for working class action."

Aronowitz is not the only former New Leftist who has recently developed an enthusiasm for electoral politics. But exposing the repressiveness hidden within formally democratic institutions was one of the genuine achievements of the New Left; rather than simply switching bandwagons, we need to examine what aspects of that critique can be rejected as faulty and which need to be retained.

The New Left attacked the myth that, under democratic capitalism, political institutions create the possibility or actuality of popular rule of society. The main power centers of modern society do not lie in the institutions of formal democracy, but in the executive, military, and corporate bureaucracies.

Systems based on representation rather than participation tend to exclude the majority from the process of policy formation except for what frequently becomes a ritualistic process of voting for a candidate. Electoral action has time and again been the means by which radical and socialist movements have been coopted by existing establishments. In a critique of both social democracy and Leninism, the New Left argued that, to achieve genuine democracy, it would be necessary to dismantle the centralized powers of state and corporation and create a system of popular participation in decision-making.

The refusal to participate in the electoral arena was a determination not to endorse the greatest legitimation of the existing society, namely, the belief that

American society was a genuine democracy. Instead, the New Left tried to point to what it felt were the real sources of power, of which the political system was merely a reflection.

An Alternative Approach to Electoralism

I believe that we still must expose the falsehood that existing processes of representative democracy allow the people to shape their world and show the many forces -- economic and other -- outside the arena of electoral democracy which help determine its results. It is still important to oppose the social-democratic illusion that electoral victory in itself can lead to the radical transformation of society.

But I think the New Left was wrong to maintain that the power of political institutions is somehow an illusion, merely a reflection of some more real power that resides elsewhere. It does indeed draw on sources of power outside the political sphere, but they also draw on it. Therefore we need to contest the power of ruling groups by means of coordinated action in many spheres of society, including but not limited to the political arena.(5)

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, appropriately modified, can help us here. For Gramsci, the economy was the ultimate determinant of power, but that power was expressed and implemented in many social spheres, from military violence to religious institutions to popular beliefs. The hegemony of a class was based not only in its economic power, but in the correspondence of other spheres to the conditions necessary for its rule. Once we drop the supposition of economic determination, we can see that power grows from a lot of places: from the barrel of a gun and from the ideas in people's heads, from control of the means of production and from the emotions that move people to act. A social group is able to create hegemony by coordinating elements of many kinds into a system that no other group is able, for the time being, to destroy. (6) As activists, we attempt to construct or contest such coordinations.

Learning from the Greens

The strategy of the Green movement in West Germany, although not above criticism or directly transferable to the U.S. context, corresponds to this approach. The Greens "do not define power as simple control of the central state apparatus but view it as a broader network of social and political relations to be transformed throughout the whole of society."(7) This theory of power leads to a strategy for change which does not fit established models of either revolution or reform. Their goal is "to assail the State, to crumble it;" one Green slogan says, "Let's make the State into cucumber salad."(8)

The Greens do not assert that radicals should organize unions or community organizations or communes instead of engaging in politics. Rather, they seek an active relation to the existing political institutions, both by fielding "Green" tickets in elections and by demonstrations and others forms of mass confrontation with the state. But, far from trying to "capture state power" by either electoral or revolutionary means, their demands on the state are designed to transfer wealth and power away from centralized corporate and bureaucratic structures to decentralized communities.

Action addressed to the state is seen as only one, and by no means necessarily the most important, sphere of activity: squatting, community organizing, creating counter-cultures, and building alternative economic institutions are seen as equally necessary. The Greens aim for a coordinated presence in many social spheres, of which the political arena is one, but only one. Their refusal to limit themselves to electoral participation is itself a refusal to endorse the existing political institutions as an adequate expression of the popular will.(9)

A Non-Electorally Focused Opposition Bloc

The specifics of U.S. political institutions make an effective electoral challenge from the left difficult. The system of proportional representation which allowed the Greens to elect representatives to legislatures with only 5% of the vote created a tactical opportunity unavailable to us except in exceptional local situations. Our "winner-take-all" elections favor centerist candidates; personality- rather than party-centered politics demands charismatic but ambiguous candidates like

Jesse Jackson; electoral success in America is usually based on big bucks.

We need to apply as much tactical creativity to our situation as the Greens did to theirs to transcend the limits of our political system. I doubt that the most fruitful direction here is either forming a third party or attempting to take over the Democratic Party. I would look instead to a combination of mass lobbying and political pressure -- used so effectively by public interest groups, the right, and business interests -- with the direct action campaigns that were the hallmark of the New Left.(10)

Movements based on non-violent direct action, like the labor movements in the 1930's and the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements of the 1960's, have often been the real "opposition party" in America. For such movements to take the next step and constitute themselves as a bloc around a program of basic social changes does not necessarily require that they focus on the electoral arena.(11)

Indeed, at this point I think we need to talk less in terms of a "vehicle" for the political representation of a bloc than the process for its expression and consolidation. Here it seems to me we need a process of "agenda-setting from below", in which we define issues to which those in power -- and the rest of the population -- must respond.

An example of what I have in mind is the recent rise of the Free South Africa Movement, which has suddenly forced on the political establishment and many subsidiary institutions an acceptance of South African racial oppression as a key political issue while it has also built a coalition of the very forces that are included in Aronowitz' proposed bloc.

I would suggest as a hypothesis to be tested that one key to the success of such efforts is the combination of direct action, a demand for change made on the national government, and a multitude of local targets (universities, pension plans, businesses, local and state governments, even wealthy individuals) who can be forced to act without waiting for the national government.(12) One could imagine many ways these same elements can be combined in other struggles. A demand for a national policy requiring equal pay for work of comparable worth can be combined with local organizing and direct action campaigns against local private and public employers who discriminate against women. Local use of eminent domain for worker/community takeovers of shutdown companies can be combined with a demand for coordinated national investment in such enterprises.(13) Demands that the government end military aid to countries that suppress their workers' human rights can be combined with local direct action against companies that are transferring their jobs to such countries. In such an approach, the relations between local and national action and between use of direct action and of "legitimate" political channels can become less conflicted and more synergistic.

Program

The only program Aronowitz spells out in these books is "A Program for the New Progressive Alliance," which is intended to restore and expand the social safety net. It includes extended unemployment compensation, a 30-hour work week, preserving social security, and renewed enforcement of affirmative action. He acknowledges that this would be "along the lines of the old New Deal" with the addition of reduced military spending and more progressive taxation to reduce deficit spending. This program, which hardly contains a position not endorsed by Teddy Kennedy, reads as if Aronowitz had never read the preceding pages of his own book or considered the words it quotes from Bluestone and Harrison: "The rise of international competition and the increasing velocity of capital mobility make the entire panoply of liberal policies ineffective, unaffordable, and ultimately unproductive."

Aronowitz endorses in passing what I think could be a far more fruitful approach to an integrating program for such a bloc, Staughton Lynd's concept of "reindustrialization from below."(14)

Lynd's proposal grows out of the recent movements against plant closings. Where multinational corporations have refused to operate steel mills and other productive facilities, workers and local communities have begun to ask, "why don't we buy the damn place?" Lynd proposes that they do so, using the power of eminent domain which allows communities to acquire private

property for a public purpose, and run them under worker/community control. He suggests that these be financed by the same kind of Federal public investment that has been urged by Felix Rohaytan and other advocates of "reindustrialization" but that, instead of a national investment "czar," these funds be administered on a decentralized basis by an agency which functions somewhat like the Federal Legal Services Corporation. The result would be a network of local and regional authorities somewhat like the TVA, but subject to much more control from below. These productive facilities would be reoriented toward meeting local and regional needs, rather than export for international competition. While this might involve some loss of economies of scale, it would put local communities more in control of their economic destinies and free them from continuous disruption by the decisions of distant corporate managers and the uncontrolled forces of the world market.

I believe this approach can be the centerpiece of a program that might in fact help unify a new opposition bloc for something far more radical than a patching of the social safety net. Like the Greens' approach, it focuses on disintegrating and redistributing the power and wealth now centralized in corporations and the state, pointing toward expanded forms of democracy. It addresses fundamental concerns of environmentalists because it moves toward smaller-scale, more environmentally-sound forms of economic development. It appeals directly to the needs of workers for employment, of communities for goods and services, and of both for greater control of their lives. And it begins to move toward production for use rather than profit without having to establish a centralized state planning apparatus.

At Home and Abroad

Such a program also ties closely to the concerns of the movements for peace and against U.S. interventionism. It requires a major shift of resources away from the military and a concomitant shift in America's foreign policy goals. It would also begin to provide an alternative to international economic domination as the basis for prosperity in the U.S. This is crucial because the interdependence of domestic and international spheres, barely touched on in these books, has become the fulcrum of American politics and must lie at the core of any radical program.

For the Right, union-busting, cutting of public services, and return to 19th-century social policies and ideologies in general is legitimated by the need for capital accumulation to build a strong, internationally-competitive American economy. Such a strong economy, in turn, is necessary to provide the military power to preserve and extend American's global domination, which itself is necessary to preserve America's economic life and national pride.

No policy proposed from the Left will be viable unless it addresses domestic and foreign aspects of the present crisis in an integrated way. For example, the various trade union and welfare state programs proposed in Aronowitz' program aim to increase wages and government spending; given the present structure of the world economy, their effect would be primarily to shift still more productive capital out of the U.S., further hastening deindustrialization. On the other hand, peace movement proposals for disarmament and an end to the pursuit of U.S. hegemony would, in the absence of domestic economic change, result in economic disaster. The key to a plausible Left program is to present a democratic, decentralized, community-controlled economy as the means by which the U.S. can withdraw from its Sissiphian quest for world domination while providing a better life for its own people.

Bloc-Nurturing

The process of constructing a bloc and defining its goals is not primarily a matter of calling a convention or issuing a manifesto. Rather it is a continuing process in which various groups assimilate each other's approaches and accommodate to each other's needs. Here again the Greens suggest a model in which a variety of groups with different roots and approaches have striven to cooperate while celebrating their multiplicity. A new bloc, if it emerges, will be the result of thousands of concrete acts of cooperation around particular issues and of the dialogues that emerge from them. The single-issue campaigns, labor/community alliances, and local rainbow coalitions of today are proto-blocs which can grow into a more stable community of allies tomorrow. Anybody, in any locale, can help cultivate that growth.

Notes

(1) I would like to thank Jill Cutler, John Brown Childs, and the editors of Workers' Democracy for comments on earlier versions of this piece.

(2) As John Brown Childs argues in his forthcoming book The Dialectics of Freedom, this privileging of the proletariat has another root in Marxist theory as well. Any theory which defines a particular sphere of society as uniquely determining will also define those who occupy that sphere as the central agents of this historical process. Such theories reflect and tend to function as legitimations for the interests of particular social groups. Thus, economic determinism is a legitimating ideology for both capitalists and workers, technological determinism for engineers, cultural determinism for intellectuals. By identifying the economy as the determinant of society, determinist Marxists have already decreed that all groups other than economic classes will be of subordinate importance for consciousness-formation and social change. A social theory which did not express particular, limited social interests would have to regard the various spheres of social life as all fully real and in principle equally important until proved otherwise.

(3) For a more extended discussion of the economic forces currently undermining union power, see my "Crisis Economy: Born-Again Labor Movement?" in Monthly Review, March, 1984.

(4) For a development of this point, see David Montgomery's "Comment: Making History But Not Under Circumstances Chosen By Ourselves," which replies to my "Crisis Economy: Born-Again Labor Movement?" in Monthly Review, March, 1984.

(5) This argument also applies to that trend within the workers council tradition which argues that, since real power grows from workers at the point of production, struggles around "political" issues should be ignored.

(6) The same process can be conducted by actors originating in non-economic spheres. Cynthia Cockburn, for example, has recently applied Gramsci's concepts of hegemony to explaining domination of women by men. Cynthia Cockburn, Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change, Pluto Press, 1983.

(7) pp. 15-16, Carl Boggs, "The Greens, Anti-Militarism and the Global Crisis," Radical America, Vol. 17 No. 1.

(8) quoted p. 33, John Ely, "The Greens" in Radical America, Vol. 17 No. 1.

(9) See the special issue on the Greens in Radical America, Vol. 17 No. 1.

(10) In evaluating the electoral arena, we need to be aware that it is going through rapid and confusing changes at the present time. We need to be alert to unexpected openings, such as the black political mobilization reflected in the Harold Washington, Mel King, and Jesse Jackson campaigns, which at least changed the "discursive rules" of Democratic politics at least for a time. The party system itself is changing as party loyalties decline and more and more voters become independent or register with a party merely to participate in the primaries. Such changes may alter the very meaning of electoral participation in ways that we can hardly anticipate today.

(11) Indeed, the formation of such an oppositional bloc around a radical program to be implemented by mass direct action was very much the conception on which Martin Luther King was operating at the time of his death. See special Martin Luther King issue of WIN, August, 1983, especially "King and Revolution: The Land Beyond" by Vincent Harding.

(12) The rise of the labor movement and the civil rights movement could be analyzed in similar terms. The Free South Africa Movement is also exemplary in that it includes a dimension of international solidarity along with its local and national focus -- something that should be included as much as possible in all movement campaigns today.

(13) See discussion of Staughton Lynd's proposals for such a program below.

(14) Staughton Lynd, "Reindustrialization from Below," Commonwork Pamphlets.