

# Civic Disaffection and the Democratic Party

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America, once hailed as the new world of riches and freedom, now presents itself as a nation simmering with undefined domestic ills and ominous military impulses. Even some of its most ardent defenders glimpse the new condition, if mainly through a glass, darkly. Neoconservatives trace our troubles to the rise of unreasonable expectations among spoiled citizens who refuse to accept limits necessary to the good life, while they attribute the rising tide of entitlements to the seductive influence of an intellectual class alienated from the achievements of modernity. The champions of "reindustrialization" accept and embellish this account. In their view, new obstacles to capital-realization constitute the basic source of our troubles. While recognizing the passive resistance of workers, welfare recipients, and consumers to the new modes of mobilization, they treat it as a problem to be solved by managerial skill. Welfare liberals, oblivious until recently to the ground shifting beneath their feet, still hope that the collapse of the Reagan program will restore liberal compassion to public favor.

Each of these perspectives struggles to recapture a world we are losing, to rekindle a fading vision of the future promised by the society of riches. Each strategy of restoration, if it is to project the positive image desired, must silence deep doubts stirring in many circles and contain the expressions of disillusionment among subordinate constituencies asked to believe old promises while they bear new domestic burdens and foreign risks.

Walter Dean Burnham provides a more credible account of these troubles, and though he refuses to soften us up with contrived expressions of optimism, his interpretation may provide the ground for a new position to be established in the current political debate. Burnham contends that state priorities such as capital accumulation that might revitalize the economy are unable to secure the allegiance of a legion of nonvoters who resist the servile roles reserved for them in the neoconservative scenarios of sacrifice; while more compassionate programs, pursued by the liberal wing of the Democratic party, are unable to generate the broad coalition needed to enact them, to overcome roadblocks placed in their path by a variety of strategically located interests, or to sustain the rate of economic growth needed to protect their economic basis. We face "a general crisis of the regime as a whole," though its real character is not yet articulated in our political dialogue.

One fears that if the current impasse persists, the frustrations and anxieties building within it will increase public tolerance for an extension of repressive controls over those who hamper the scenarios of the right. It becomes clear that the democratic left, currently out of touch with the party of nonvoters and out of favor with organized labor, must break new ground if it is to respond to these new circumstances. Since I concur with much of Burnham's account I will try first to develop some of its dimensions further and then ask what implications they might carry for a reconstitution of the democratic left.

Consider a list of phenomena Burnham mentions at various points in his essay: the recurrent vote of no-confidence for incumbent administrations; the large number of nonvoters; the decomposition of the Democratic party; the fragmentation of aggrieved constituencies into single-issue groups; the growing hostility within stable sections of the working class toward new claimant groups and insurgent movements; the declining proportion of young Americans who can hope to buy a home; the call from right and center for a shift from consumption to investment and from welfare to military expenditures; the rise of hedonism; the emergence of the Moral Majority. Each phenomenon on this list is a cause, a manifestation, or both, of disenchantment with the future available to our civilization.

It is true, of course, that the hedonist and the fundamentalist (as I shall call the convert to the Moral Majority) tend to diverge along lines of region, age, class, and urban/rural location. It is equally true that each holds the other in contempt, that the fundamentalist tends to migrate to the Republican party, and that the hedonists distribute themselves between the party of Democrats and the reserve army of nonvoters. But common threads of anxiety and sensibility run through these divisions. To draw out this common sense we must first revise one of the themes presented by Burnham.

The American state, says Burnham, is marked by a "constitution designed to fragment power" and "a culture which has a remarkably weak sense of collective public good." The first assessment is largely correct, though it can be argued that the American system visibly fragments dissident constituencies while it invisibly encourages the coalescence of corporate hegemony through the dual media of the market and the state. It is the second assertion, though, that I wish to contest here. Burnham understates the degree to which the American people have shared a vision of the future and a sense of the common good. It is easy, perhaps, for intellectuals whose image of civic virtue and the common good is derived from a picture of the classical Greek polis to misread the common sensibility within American politics. For it contains the distinctive understanding that private initiative, self-reliance, and a restricted state role provide both defining

ingredients within its vision of the good life and essential preconditions of its realization.

Through much of the twentieth century, and certainly during the period from 1945 to 1963 discussed by Burnham, American political and social conflicts were at once diverse and contained within a widely shared vision of the good life in the making. This sense of the common good helped to set parameters to public conflicts, to establish the ground upon which compromises could be forged, and to justify (typically as temporary inconveniences) the uneven distribution of sacrifices and burdens borne within the country.

Two sets of priorities have governed our civilization. We have sought to perfect a private economy of growth and expanding affluence so that each generation could be more free, prosperous, and secure than the ones preceding it, and we have sought to sustain an inclusive political democracy flourishing within the confines of the American Constitution. Progress in America *meant* the growth of prosperity and the perfection of democratic rights. The legitimacy of the order, as we have known it, has revolved around the ability of each set of priorities to retain the allegiance of each new generation and the ability of each priority to progress in relative harmony with the other.

Now we are in a better position to interpret the historic break identified by Burnham. The pursuit of material progress for present and future generations now seems illusory to many, and the compatibility between that pursuit and democratic citizenship faces powerful strains. The phenomena that Burnham identifies as characteristic of America in the 1970s and 1980s represent symptoms of a massive withdrawal of sentiment from a common vision of the future. The institutions that were to be the means of its realization have eroded the virtues of self-reliance and independence once thought to be essential to that vision. At the same time, there is growing anxiety about the future of economic growth and private affluence. As the credibility of the old economic dream recedes and as no new sense of a common future emerges to replace it, ordinary people create a variety of private strategies to secure a semblance of personal meaning and dignity in these new circumstances. Meanwhile elites strive to find new ways to impose new disciplines and limits on these ordinary people. We are thus witnessing the simultaneous emergence of an underground economy and an underground culture of civic disaffection in some circles and the introduction of new means of social control and ideological management of hope in others.

Hedonism and fundamentalism represent two instances of these defensive strategies. Each expresses, in its distinctive way, the declining credibility of the old American dream to new generations expecting to find meaning and significance in life. Hedonism is a withdrawal of sentiment from the larger life and an attempt to generate meaning from resources susceptible to one's own control. It thus concentrates on the pleasures of the body. Since the hedonist by definition

repudiates civic virtue and the common good as restraints on pleasure, the only way to keep his conduct within the grooves demanded by private and public bureaucracies is to manipulate private desires and fantasies to serve public purposes. The rise of hedonism, in an order with highly developed imperatives of social coordination, impels state and private bureaucracies to devise finely-tuned incentive systems and modes of coercive control.

Fundamentalism, expressed as rigid, punitive moralism authorized by personal experience of the word of God, constitutes a struggle to freeze the public world so that the future can be delayed. It is governed by fear of the future we are building. Private meaning is secured through the personal relation to God as the remoralized individual tries to insulate himself against the loss of significance in the larger life. But since the flow of the larger life now threatens to swamp this private morality it too must be stilled. The punitive orientation to those who flout the revealed morality—for instance the hedonists—blocks the public flow of corrosive forces and suppresses dangerous ambiguities within the self concerning the restraints it endorses.

The retreat to pleasures of the self and to punitive moralism represent diverse responses to a common experience: the devaluation of the common good available in the social order. Until recently the sense of the common good was so widely shared there was little need to delineate its contours more closely through public debate. The debates centered on how to realize and protect it. But the element of commonality within which American conflicts and struggles have moved is burning out, even while a large cast of politicians and intellectuals tries heroically to rekindle the embers. Ends and standards we previously shared in common increasingly appear today as imperatives and burdens that the order is compelled to impose if it is to sustain itself. The imperatives of capital accumulation and market protection require a shift from consumption to investment and from social to military expenditures; the number of people who can now expect to own a new home, provide higher education for their children, and sustain a fulfilling career is declining even though these represent paradigmatic components of the good life promised in America; items of consumption once experienced as luxuries to be enjoyed by one's children in the future now become necessities for participation in the life of the society; policies designed to protect the quality of air, water, and soil, and thereby to sustain the quality of human life for future generations, are dismantled because they pose obstacles to the expansion of private capital; old workers find themselves shunted to the sidelines in the name of perpetual economic progress, while their younger replacements glimpse the future for which *they* are being groomed; and the tightening web of international dependence, by multiplying points of apparent military insecurity, brings the civilization of productivity closer to its demise. The civilization of productivity—understood as those practices designed to promote economic growth and private

affluence because they are thought to be good in themselves and essential preconditions to personal freedom and political democracy—finds itself pressed to subordinate all other ends to the interest of growth. The goal of the civilization of productivity becomes the imperative of growth.

In this context multiple strategies of withdrawal, evasion, and self-protection are not surprising. The surprise is that so few intellectuals read the symptoms correctly. As the ends of the civilization are increasingly experienced as imperatives people define their lives accordingly. They prepare to resist and evade the disciplines applied to them or they join the growing cadres that invent and apply new controls to this recalcitrant material.

Are people today *simply* innocent of these conditions? Better to read the apparent innocence that persists in many quarters as a series of half-conscious strategies to ward off acknowledgement of the historical course we are on, to ward off, that is, the sense of disorientation which emerges when meaning and purpose are detached from the roles one is called upon to perform. Neoconservatives are apt to interpret the variety of lifestyles, self-serving political demands, and underground strategies as immature or mindless refusals to accept lowered expectations. They are better comprehended, though, as fragile maneuvers to avoid becoming too mindful of clouds forming on the horizon of the civilization of productivity. We are in transition from a politics of the common good to a politics of system imperatives because we can now discern through historical experience the illusions inside our old dreams; and the experience of this transition, still unarticulated within the official terms of political discourse, permeates our institutional life.

**W**hat parts do the state and, especially, the Democratic party play in these developments? The state is caught in a bind that sharply reduces its freedom to act creatively. Its range of options is limited because, on the one hand, it is supposed to be responsive to citizens through contested elections while, on the other, it is expected to support the system of private productivity by encouraging private capital accumulation and economic growth in an unfavorable environment. The needs and pleas of constituencies shuffled to the margins of the system of productivity are overridden by the need to establish a military shield for western capitalism, by the play of domestic factions with impressive market and political resources, and by the imperative to limit state responses to those programs that do not weaken further the incentives to invest, the motivation to work, the sense of self-respect, and the willingness to abide by laws among those still incorporated within the life of the economy.

The welfare programs that result increase the dependence of beneficiaries, maintain them at low levels of support, demean them in their own eyes, and

render them contemptible in the eyes of many clinging to modest roles and symbols of self-respect. The state faces a further limitation as well. It must not appear to socialize means of production while responding to the proliferating "side effects" of private enterprise. The experience of socialism in the twentieth century convinces Americans that the gap between socialist aspirations and achievements is even larger than that between the old American dream and its future prospects. Indeed the failure of covert symptoms of disengagement to coalesce into an insurgent political movement is linked to the common sense that the socialist alternative, as it has so far been articulated in theory and realized in practice, contains its own dialectic of social regimentation. The limited sense of alternatives encourages relatively well-positioned constituencies to endorse each new illusion defined by the right or center while it drives marginal elements to the underground economy and the class of nonvoters.

In these circumstances the Republican party may be able to define its mission with greater clarity, but it faces a series of credibility gaps as its appeals to the values of self-reliance and independence are mocked by measures that impose new dependencies and controls on the subordinate classes. Its willingness to give priority to imperatives emanating from the privately incorporated economy and to pressures flowing from western states now enjoying the expansionary run that precedes the emergence of urban malaise will shrink its share of the electorate after a period of incumbency. But it does attract a stable base of support; it does have a fairly clear agenda and a well-ordered battery of traditional symbols; and the party of nonvoters does provide it with a competitive edge.

The Democratic party faces a more volatile situation. Its natural base consists of a variety of state workers, scattered professionals, organized labor in the corporate sector, unorganized workers in the market sector, minorities facing discrimination, the marginally employed, the unemployed, and welfare recipients. But the programs it enacts to support the underclass pose threats to the identity available to many in the working class. When these tensions are accentuated the underclass loses the most because it has no other party to turn to. It tends to slide into the party of nonvoters under such conditions, while organized workers can threaten to defect to the Republican party or to sit out particular elections. The Democratic party is thus constrained in its quest to mobilize its largest potential coalition by the nature of two-party politics, the existing structure of electoral options, and the leverage available to organized elements of its coalition to forge compromises favoring them over the underclass. The Democratic party thus faces a dilemma rather than a range of alternatives: it can ignore the social needs of a large class of nonvoters, thereby perpetuating their powerlessness; or it can extend welfare state benefits to them, thereby alienating traditional Democratic supporters. Whichever way it turns it faces serious barriers to the creation of a stable coalition large enough to allow it to win office and govern ef-

fectively. And feeding this fragmentation of its coalition is not only the population shift to areas still relatively protected from the devastating effects of long-term corporate expansion but the fact that many residents in this virgin territory are refugees from areas previously serving as the prime targets of New Deal and Great Society programs. The potential Democratic coalition threatens to founder on the widely shared suspicion that four decades of welfare liberalism, promising to draw all Americans into the circle of affluence, freedom, and security, have increased dependence, demeaned the dignity of welfare recipients, and extended bureaucratic control into new spheres of American life. The welfare state is now considered by many a leviathan created by the Democratic party. That experience draws people into Republican rhetoric of reindustrialization, the creativity of free enterprise, and the personal ethic of self-reliance even while the operative programs of Nixon, Ford, and Reagan extend surveillance, militarize welfare, and restrict the life-chances of a growing segment of the populace.

The dilemmas of the Democratic party cannot be ignored by dissidents who want to forge new forms of political organization that transcend conventional party politics. For the constitutional institution of elections through single-member districts and plurality vote means that an insurgent third party can aspire mainly to press the Democratic party to revise its priorities or, as a very long shot, to replace it as one of the two major parties. In either event, a new movement that succeeds will confront eventually the task of forging a viable coalition out of fragments that now elude the grasp of the Democratic party. Its chances of success will turn on its ability to speak to the civic disaffection generated during the period of hegemony by welfare liberalism.

**I**s there a way out of this swamp? This question can be considered in sufficient depth and detail only through sustained dialogue by a diverse array of men and women who share enough to conclude that the accounts of reindustrialists, neoconservatives, and welfarists misconstrue our real condition and generate repressive implications. I believe that participants to this dialogue should consider (though certainly go beyond) the following agenda.

First, neither major party today speaks to the deep anxieties Americans feel about the prospects of thermonuclear war. Demands for effective arms control, for the demilitarization of American welfare, and for the deprofessionalization of American troops may alienate the military-industrial complex, but they will also draw creative constituencies into the party and release new energies within it. The construction of an affirmative electoral coalition could not achieve lasting monuments if it failed to roll back the militarization of American life and the probability of thermonuclear war.

Second, one of the major sources of welfare-state malaise resides in its imperative to support the continual expansion of corporate capital in the elusive effort to protect welfare benefits. A viable new movement must transcend the defensive posture welfare statisticians now adopt to those glowing with programs for economic growth and selective austerity. It must therefore devise ways to tame the growth imperative itself. If progress is not made on this front, the nation will shuffle back to the dismal options now before it. The debate over how to tame the growth imperative is yet to be opened. But one promising approach is to reduce the consumption needs of the populace by reconstituting irrational product forms that have become necessary objects of consumption in the American economy.<sup>1</sup> The forms of health care, transportation, housing, and food available in this country approach the status of exclusive goods: if restricted to the affluent they create hardships for the remaining populace that provides infrastructural support for these forms (for example, taxes to support complex medical training and technologies, highway systems, and air travel; tax deductions for mortgage interest; waste disposal and transportation subsidies for the food industry); if extended to the entire populace they damage the social and natural environment, increase social expenses borne by the state, and fuel inflationary wage demands by consumers scrambling to participate in the established universe of consumption. The constant expansion of consumption needs generates much of the political support today for ruthless state policies to foster economic growth. There are more inclusive forms of health, transportation, housing, and food that could at once ease the demands on working class budgets and draw the underclass more fully into the life of the society. These programs, if well designed, would drain electoral support for repressive strategies of reindustrialization and encourage constituencies now divided to draw closer together in a progressive political movement.

Third, the state must emphasize inclusive and universal programs over the selective and divisive programs it now presents. Some established welfare programs must be preserved, certainly, but new initiatives must move toward greater universality to establish justice in the distribution of state burdens and obliga-

<sup>1</sup> This is a large topic in need of further exploration. I have pursued it in "The Politics of Reindustrialization," *democracy* 1, no. 3 (July 1981): 9-21, and with Michael Best in *The Politicized Economy*, second edition (Lexington Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1981). Two books that, taken together, explore the relations among consumption forms, the structure of social life, the pressures for growth, and the illusions of continued growth after a certain plateau has been attained are Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), and Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977).

tions and to draw old and new clients of the welfare state into a more cohesive constituency. The replacement of the professional army, now drawn from the underclass, by one recruited through a universal draft might be one step in the right direction; the universalization of military service might help to create more critical orientations to militarist policies and to provide the basis for the demilitarization of welfare. The inclusive modes of consumption referred to above would be consistent with this principle as well. Family allowances would help to maintain the integrity of family life without encouraging some workers to believe that their families are taxed to keep nonworking families intact.

Fourth, while continuing to dramatize the dangers, dependencies, divisions, and injustices built into reindustrialization scenarios of the right and center, a new movement, which hopes to be as pertinent in our day as the New Deal was in its, will express renewed appreciation for the values of self-respect, self-reliance, and local initiative. The hegemony of the liberal welfare state during the last four decades has allowed the right to capture rhetorical control of these symbols even while programs of the right strip people of the skills, resources, and dignity they need to live according to these standards.

There are several areas in which space for self-reliance might be established while claims of equity and justice were supported, including: the production of durable commodities simple enough in design to allow owners to repair them; the introduction of energy forms centered in the home or locality rather than controlled by policies of corporate giants; state policies that encourage families to flourish as stable units; the reconstruction of a transportation system, now organized around the automobile, to allow urban residents, the disabled, the poor, and the elderly to reestablish mobility; the reintroduction of childbirth in the home; and the legalization of many barter agreements now officially defined to fall within the underground economy. Each of the proposals needs to be considered in detail before endorsing it, but the point in listing them here is to illustrate how the values of self-reliance and justice might be supported by state initiatives that transcend the primacy of market power and corporate priorities.

Consider, in the same spirit, how a reconstitution of the American health care system could foster three of the standards elucidated above. Medical care in America is structured by the capacity of physicians to set fees privately; a partially collectivized system of payments; high technology; curative treatment; and the proliferation of malpractice suits initiated by maltreated patients. It is an irrational system, which must either exclude many or become inclusive by feeding inflation and civic disaffection. And the state is heavily invested in it. In 1981 the state lost between \$17.5 and \$24 billion in potential tax revenues on health insurance premiums and \$3.4 billion in individual medical deductions. Current state policy magnifies the power of physicians over patients by partially collectivizing payments and leaving power to set fees in private hands, while its own subsidies

favor the affluent over the poor. When total state medical subsidies are considered, 45 percent reach poor and low-income people while 55 percent go to the affluent.<sup>2</sup> A rational policy would divert much of the \$35 billion in total state funds supporting the current health care system to one embodying local, prepaid health care centers, salaried medical and paramedical staff accountable to its members, an emphasis on preventive over curative care, and the return of a large portion of health knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to individuals and families. As successful experiments with such a design already show, its system of rewards and accountability encourages physicians to promote greater patient self-sufficiency in health care; to concentrate on maintaining an individual's health over the entire course of his or her life; and to control patients' costs through salaries rather than fees, a lower rate of surgery, and more preventive care. Such a design contains the potential for extension to the entire populace without contributing to new rounds of inflation, political resentment, and medical corruption. It is an *inclusive* good that also fosters self-reliance.

A new democratic movement on the left must advance on three fronts at once. It must seek to revitalize the relation between the state and the citizen, to tame imperatives flowing from the privately incorporated economy, and to establish new economic priorities that allow all members of the society to be full-fledged citizens. To advance on any of these fronts it must make comparable progress on the others. Liberals and Democrats who fail to follow this course will find themselves drawn increasingly into the orbit of right-wing strategies of reindustrialization, selective austerity, and disciplinary control—all endorsed in the name of economic rationality.

<sup>2</sup> These figures are taken from a study by Gail Wilensky for the Center for Health Service Research as reported in the *New York Times*, January 1, 1981.