

The Prospects for Social Democracy

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Whether or not the Reagan “revolution” signals a realignment of political forces, liberals are not likely to recover the popular support that kept them in power during most of the period between the New Deal and the Great Society. Even if the Democrats returned to power in 1984, it is hard to believe that they would have any answer to the question facing the country—how to achieve an equitable distribution of goods and services or even to keep social peace in a period of economic decline. Now that Reagan’s economic program has run into opposition from Congress, Wall Street, the press, and many of the constituencies most directly threatened by his budget cuts, the Democrats stand to gain seats in the 1982 Congressional elections and perhaps even to regain the presidency in 1984. But they have no program that is likely to work, and in any case the political coalition that formerly supported their modest version of the welfare state now lies in ruins.

Walter Dean Burnham’s analysis leads to the conclusion that the present crisis probably goes deeper than a “critical realignment” of the party structure. At first glance, the Reagan landslide might appear to be one of those “critical elections” that have periodically changed the shape of American politics (1828, 1860, 1896, 1932). Here and in other recent essays, Burnham argues that something even more fundamental than a realignment is taking place: a process of party decomposition that has not only destroyed the New Deal coalition but made it increasingly difficult for either party to govern. The weakening of party discipline, the growing gap between Congressional and presidential coalitions, the passing of the coattail effect, the prevalence of split-ticket voting, the growing number of independent voters, the primary system, the transfer of the party’s educational and ideological functions to the mass media, and the rise in nonvoting all mark a crisis of the party system as a whole. According to Burnham, this crisis of party politics coincides with and reflects the crisis of

American capitalism—in particular, the failure of liberal regimes to stabilize the economy by means of public expenditures designed to encourage mass consumption and to buy off political dissidence.

Burnham's analysis of the collapse of liberalism helps to explain why many liberals now call themselves radicals, socialists, or social democrats. The belief seems to be gaining ground that welfare liberalism no longer holds much hope of a solution to the deepening crisis of democratic institutions. During the last ten years, many liberals have begun to argue that equal opportunity is not enough. Debates about affirmative action and "equality of condition" arise out of a new insistence that a liberal state has an obligation not merely to enforce the rules of fair competition but to bring about a fair distribution of wealth. A number of prominent liberal theorists have begun to call for social democracy: Robert Heilbroner, John Kenneth Galbraith, Robert Lekachman, and now Burnham himself. The leftward drift of liberal publications like the *Nation* and the *Progressive* is another indication of the growing feeling that the revitalization of democracy has come to depend on a politics beyond liberalism.

The question now is just what direction a more radical politics ought to take. Should dissatisfaction with liberal orthodoxy extend to Marxist orthodoxy as well? Does either social democracy or socialism itself offer a real alternative to liberalism? Or do they share with liberalism an uncritical faith in technology, progress, and centralized power? Should "radicals" accept the modern organization of industry as the indispensable basis of a socialist order? Should they join Marx in celebrating the marvelous achievements of bourgeois society in destroying the old subsistence economy, wiping out small property, substituting machinery for handicrafts, and consolidating production on a global scale? Has industrialism laid the material foundations of socialism or weakened them by eradicating the communal economy of earlier times? Does political and cultural progress lie in the direction of internationalism, cosmopolitanism, a rejection of outmoded attachments to the soil, and the parochialism they allegedly encourage? Should imperialism too be seen (as Marx saw it) as a progressive force, which lays the basis of an international order? Should radicals ally themselves with the conquest of "backwardness" by the enlightened metropolitan mind? Or does a new particularism, on the contrary, offer the best hope of a pluralist world in which ethnic, racial, and national differences will be respected? Should radicals seek to capture the modern state or dismantle it? Should they side with capitalism in its relentless war against continuity and tradition, in the hope that a new order requires the destruction of every vestige of the old? Or should they regard their task as one essentially of conservation and renewal?

In a very rough and general way, these questions define the lines of cleavage that have begun to emerge among radicals, more and more sharply, in recent discussions. Burnham's social democratic solution leans toward the modernizing, centralizing end of the radical spectrum. His work recently has been of great value to me, to my students, and surely to many others on the left in providing a remarkably clear explanation of the reasons for the decay of liberal politics. What his essay leaves unclear, however, is why a social democratic politics would work any better. It is not clear, for instance, just how a social democratic movement would differ from what he calls political capitalism, except presumably in its firm commitment to the kind of welfare state that liberals in the past have accepted only half-heartedly. Nor is it clear how a social democratic politics in the United States would avoid the fate of so many social democratic regimes in Europe, which have usually served merely to socialize the costs of capitalist decline. I think Burnham tends to exaggerate the vitality of social democracy in Europe and the importance of the vacuum left in American politics by the absence of social democratic parties. Thus he argues that the "party of nonvoters" consists of the kind of people who would elsewhere be drawn to such movements. This thesis is more plausible as an explanation of what happened in the past than as a recommendation for the usefulness of a social democratic party in the near future. It is certainly true, as Burnham has argued elsewhere, that the pattern of American politics began to diverge from the European pattern around the turn of the century—the period when social democratic ties were establishing themselves in Europe but when the United States, by contrast, developed a system of sectional politics characterized by the elimination of party competition at the national level and by the "discrediting of party itself." It is also true that election turnout began to decline in this period and has been declining more or less steadily ever since. There is thus good reason "to suspect that the large hole in voter participation which developed after 1900 roughly corresponds to the voter area in the electorate where a viable socialist movement 'ought' to have developed."¹

Even on Burnham's own account, however, there is reason to think that the long-term decline in voting reflects not merely the absence of a socialist or social democratic alternative but a deeper alienation from the

¹ "Party Systems and the Political Process," in William Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham, *The American Party Systems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 300–301. Burnham first presented this thesis in "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 7–28.

political system as a whole. The welfare state has turned the citizen into a client. The citizen's participation in politics has been limited to the single act of casting a vote, and his refusal to perform this vestigial rite of democracy cannot be reduced to his perception that neither party represents his interests. As Burnham points out, the mass media have taken over from political parties the work of political education, policy formation, and mass entertainment. The party press has disappeared. The political machine is on the way out. The combined effect of these changes is to weaken the links that once bound political parties to their constituents. The rise of interest-group politics has disfranchised the unorganized. The decay of local government further discourages popular participation. The political process as a whole is now so remote from the lives of ordinary citizens, and participation so narrowly limited to those with access to the media or to interest-group bargaining, that masses of people feel completely powerless. Under these conditions, it is hard to see how another national party, even if it were social democratic in its ideology, would overcome the deeper sources of political alienation.

Burnham's essay ignores the cultural sources of this alienation. One of the reasons for the decline of liberalism is the widening gap between the world view of liberal elites and the working people who once made up the Democratic majority and whose votes kept liberal governments in power. Liberal elites believe in "self-expression," "nonbinding commitments," abortion, gay rights, and cosmopolitanism. Working people believe in family ties, neighborhoods, and loyalty to your own kind. How would a social democratic movement put an end to the "cultural civil war," as it has been called? A social democratic party in the United States would be likely to represent the point of view of the same professional and managerial elites that dominate the recently formed Social Democratic party in England (a perfect example of the rootless modern party, largely a creation of the mass media, with plenty of support in the polls and no constituency). Instead of closing the gap between the metropolitan culture of educated elites and the culture of "middle America," a social democratic party or movement would probably widen the gap.

Under these conditions, left liberals and social democrats seem to have two choices. They can seek to change the subject of political debate—to divert attention from cultural issues back to the economic issues people on the left feel more comfortable with. Or they can rethink their own position on the issues that now divide liberals from the people who formerly supported liberal policies. Although the second of these choices is the more promising, most liberals seem to favor the first—those who have thought about the problem at all. In a recent paper entitled "A Strategy to Deal with the Right," Michael

Lerner criticizes the left for its "failure to understand and publicly legitimate the values that people seek to achieve in their family life." Betty Friedan makes a similar point in her book *The Second Stage*. But having taken a step in the right direction, both Lerner and Friedan immediately reverse themselves and fall back on the argument that cultural issues are really economic issues after all. They propose merely to revive the social democratic agenda—more government spending, expansion of human services, public housing, federally-funded child care. In other words, they propose to revive the very program from which large numbers of people are now radically disaffected.

Liberals cannot win back their constituency by executing a series of tactical shifts designed to head off the right or by treating cultural issues as private issues that can safely be left to individual choice. The definition of morality as a private matter, beyond the scope of public discussion, is part of what the whole debate about "social" issues is about. Liberals need to reexamine their own promises—in particular, their commitment to modernization and to everything it implies. It is the liberal, "pluralistic" model of society, the liberal ideology of "nonbinding commitments," the trivialization of personal relations in our society that are under attack from the right, along with other products and by-products of liberalism. If the left really wants to take back these issues from the right, it will first have to acknowledge that they are matters of legitimate concern, instead of pretending that they are matters of concern only to those who blindly resist progress or somehow fail to come to terms with the growing pains of modernization.