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# EXPLORATIONS

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## Radicals and Regionalism

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One of the central reasons that the United States is in serious trouble involves the unhappy truth that American radicalism has reached a dead end. A few keen observers understood that point as long ago as the draconian recession of 1937: they perceived that modern radicalism had exhausted its nineteenth-century capital. To use a later idiom, the New Deal was Lemon Socialism long before that wry phrase was coined in bitter frustration by radicals in Great Britain.

Let us not quibble. We are better off for the New Deal. We all know, and have shared, the benefits. But as I remember it all, Lord Keynes once said to George Bernard Shaw: "Far from being Marxist, I will use Marx to prove the Marxists wrong." Leave it to Bloomsbury. Spend the past to save the present. Capitalism at its very best: imaginative, creative, dynamic, and hopefully equitable—and to hell with tomorrow.

And for many years it appeared that the new truth was indeed true. The Marxist legacy was disinvested to save capitalism. It worked because of the Second World War and the ensuing euphoric moment of American global hegemony. The capitalist present postponed the day of reckoning, but it did not change the nature of the ultimate crisis.

But the truth *will* out. That became obvious when the New Left, despite its moral commitment, its marvelous energy, and its promising ideas, failed to evolve beyond the single-issue politics of opposing the imperial war in Vietnam. The stagnation of the Left, which involves theoretical as well as moral and pragmatic issues, very largely explains the pathetic flopping around among liberals and the revival of romantic conservatism.

Most contemporary Americans no longer even sense the crucial function of radicalism. This sad—and dangerous—state of affairs is directly related to the confusion among American radicals. Radicals have four primary responsibilities.

But to define those obligations it is first necessary to establish a working conception of radicalism.

1. A radical digs down to the roots of reality. A radical probes the sources to describe the actual—rather than the apparent—nature and ramifications of the political economy.

2. A radical develops a dynamic explanation of the relationships between the various aspects of reality.

3. A radical offers an alternative hierarchy of values.

4. A radical offers specific options, strategic as well as tactical, and engages in sustained people-to-people action to achieve those objectives.

The definition clarifies the responsibilities. Dynamic, effective radicals must offer ruthless analyses; must imagine truly different alternatives; must practice citizenship as action to realize those alternatives; and must thereby set the terms of the public dialogue regardless of how long it takes to change the world.

**I** am aware that there are exceptions to the basic proposition that I am going to advance and develop. I have learned from those brave and disregarded explorers on the frontiers of American radicalism, and also from similar conservative pioneers. But, as is more than occasionally the case, the superficially negative evidence provides powerful footnotes for the revisionist thesis.

The cornerstone of my argument is a paradox: The essence and central thrust of twentieth-century American radicalism has been defined by three nineteenth-century giants—Napoleon Bonaparte, Abraham Lincoln, and Karl Marx. Whatever their disagreements—and we are mistakenly educated to emphasize the differences between them—those prodigious individuals understood that human existence is very largely defined by four variables: place, time, space, and scale. (Both economics and sex, for example, as well as politics and war, are deeply influenced by those primary determinants.) Bonaparte, Lincoln, and Marx agreed on these essentials:

- On place—the nation-state.
- On time—the present defined as the future.
- On space—the world.
- On scale—individual human beings as corporate members of various nation-states competing to unify the globe.

Within that framework, Lincoln's determination to create a nationalistic and corporate body politic validated Bonaparte's redefinition of the French Revolution. Nationalism became the ideal *and* pragmatic way of achieving liberty, equality, and fraternity—or, in the American idiom, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No nation, no viable social system. Nationalistic order or chaos.

Evolution from localism and regionalism to nationalism—or devolution into anarchy.

Once we grasp the impact of Bonaparte (say on Jefferson) and Lincoln (say on the Populists), we can see that Marx provided a radical version of an inherently conservative proposition. Do not misunderstand me: Marx deserves all his acclaim. He did the very best anyone could have done within the assumptions shared by his generation about place, time, space, and scale. Marx's radicalism was defined by his insistence that the majority—the ordinary folk—should define the terms of corporate citizenship in a nation-state creating a better future for themselves and the world. But the inherent logic of "Workers of the world unite" leads inexorably to a superstate organized on Adam Smith's division of labor.

Granted the premises, no one could have done better. Marx was surely (and beautifully) correct when he said that he was standing Hegel on his head. Nationalism becoming internationalism must be defined from the bottom up or it would be an elitist nightmare. From Marx's perspective that was the only conceivable way to transform the nation-state from a corporate monster into an international community.

Give it your most sincere suspension of disbelief. Perhaps there was a time, say in America from 1885 to 1914, when radicals just might have turned Marxian logic back upon itself and evolved a truly human equation between place, time, space, and scale. America was so huge and variegated that it was possible to believe that an effort by capitalist corporations to integrate it into one corporate, centralized system would generate powerful and democratic regional forces that could develop their own political economy.

And, indeed, people in the Midwest, the South, and the Far West did try to create cooperative alternatives to Rockefeller, Morgan, and Carnegie. Even though they failed, they left us a legacy that we have generally ignored. We are in a better position now to succeed in what they attempted.

At the end of the Civil War, the United States *was* in flux. Conceivably, therefore, the political economy could have developed in another way. Americans might have evolved a conception of socialism that went beyond the acceptance and projection of an overcentralized and overurbanized industrialism administered with greater equity, and providing more extensive social services. Given the different kinds (and tempos) of development that were occurring during those years, we might have gone back to our roots in the Articles of Confederation; might have imagined a more relaxed and humane definition of prosperity and progress—a quality and style of life appropriate to our many combinations of place, space, and scale. I like to think that Eugene Debs (along with others) was intuitively reaching for that vision. After all, why else would anyone edit a socialist newspaper from Kansas.

But in the end we crab-scuttled away from the challenge. Marx proved cor-

rect about the ruthless, elegant simplicity of the logic of capitalist industrialization. Even so, it is important to remember that he was extrapolating from Adam Smith: the metropolis increasingly dominates the country. It is not only, perhaps not even primarily, that the bank controls the terms of trade with the barn. The metropolis sucks people out of their integrated environments and spews them into the morass of the ghetto-becoming-slum-becoming-sluburb. The capitalist metropolis is a social vacuum cleaner. It yanks people from their human place, time, space, and scale. Even more: the sustained and accelerating centralization within the metropolis distorts and even denies any sense—even memory—of a humane set of relationships.

Capitalism does not create neighborhoods. Capitalism instead cements over grass for commuter stations on the main line to nowhere. Bluntly, capitalism destroys neighborhoods and communities.

Hence we face a bit of a problem: How does one deal with a philosophy (Marxism) which praises capitalism for creating the conditions necessary for the realization of community, when in the process of fulfilling its own logic it destroys the conditions and the idea of community?

There *is* a way out of that corner; but it involves being Marxist about Marx. And here things get delicate. For twentieth-century radicals, like Marx before them, have persistently confused that viscerally Marxian analysis of the dynamics of capitalism with the rantings of peasants about sinful cities. Indeed, the metropolitan bias of twentieth-century radicals provides an ironic tribute to the validity of Marx's central thesis. But the question is not whether cities are good or evil. The issues concern their size, function, character, and their relationship with their supporting environment.

In a fundamental sense, therefore, twentieth-century radicals followed Marx in becoming victims of his fascinating combination of capitalist assumptions and socialist utopianism. The assumptions lulled him into neglecting the rigors of the dialectical process, and the projectionist utopianism led him to believe that a change of class at the center of the metropolis would change the inherent nature of the system.

Unhappily, it was wrong and wrong again. For if capitalism leads to increasing demographic imbalance, the supercentralization of power, and the destruction of community, then surely a rigorous radicalism is defined by decentralization and the diffusion of power. And if capitalism moves inexorably toward global hegemony, then surely such a radicalism is defined by regionalism in the international arena. To change rulers without changing the basic structure of the political economy can at best serve only to ameliorate the failures, costs, and limits of life within such a system. What begins as socialism drifts off into a leftish New Dealism or into a kind of nationalized syndicalism of interest groups. At worst, we forget about socialism and concern ourselves with surviving within capital-

ism. But socialism is not *more*: socialism is different and better.

The point is not to damn Marx. The point is to be Marxist about twentieth-century American radicalism. Marx did the magical things: he explained the implacable logic of the capitalist political economy and he taught us to ask the right questions. And he was adamant about human beings making their own history.

**H**ence to honor Marx we must cease projecting what was at best a marginal possibility in the late nineteenth century into the present and the future. Think of it this way: most science fiction (and a great deal of science per se) is crudely Marxist to the core. It is little more than Edward Bellamy updated with the latest technology: simply the projection of Marxian utopian hopes for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century capitalism. The good class wins and goes on to unify the world on the way to unifying the universe.

But Marx did give us the insights and the intellectual tools to move beyond that friendly and erotic fascism. Marx made us unforgettably aware of the process whereby fundamental ideas change their labels. That is probably the essential meaning of the dialectical process. What was conservative becomes radical, what was radical becomes conservative, and so on and so on.

But that essential truth often gets lost in the euphoria generated by the fireworks of the moment. Hence it is not particularly surprising that twentieth-century American radicals became so blinkered by Marx's acceptance of the creative production of the capitalist political economy that they have ignored or dismissed ostensibly conservative truths. I do not think that anything I have said or written has so annoyed and upset my radical friends and associates (let alone my liberal and conservative critics) as my insistence that we contemporary radicals can learn very important truths from people generally viewed as irrelevant (if not dotty) conservatives—even outright reactionaries.

Allow me to illustrate that point by briefly reviewing the process of highly conscious centralization of a capitalist political economy during the reign of Elizabeth I. All quibbles aside, mercantilism *was* the purposeful effort to consolidate such a political economy in the metropolis. Of course they were less efficient than we moderns. But they understood the inherent demands of capitalism and they set about meeting those imperatives with vigor and intelligence. And so radicalism was defined by moral, economic, political, and social opposition to such imperial logic. Indeed, that kind of radicalism was the basis of our American Revolution. And the idea of regional communities coming together as equals was the essence of the Articles of Confederation.

It is not simply, perhaps not primarily, that those people (as with John Quincy Adams and other antislavery northerners in later years) had the nerve to consider and even propose separation. The vital consideration involves their alternate vi-

sion of a truly human integration of place, time, space, and scale. They were not willing to be swept into the corner by progress. They meant it when they said *no*. Of course they lost, but they bequeathed us contemporary radicals a legacy we ignore at our peril. If we blink and flinch and turn away—"Great stuff, inspiring, but impractical"—then we reveal ourselves lacking both the imagination and the nerve to be truly radical.

Consider how differently America would have developed even in our own time if twentieth-century radicals had transformed Senator George Norris's idea of the Muscle Shoals project in the Tennessee Valley into the basis for a regional socialist economy, and then gone on to do the same in the other natural regions of the continent. The great Bonneville complex on the Columbia, for example, would have led to something quite different from Boeing, Hanford, corporate agriculture, and Reynolds Aluminum.

It is easy, and convenient, to dismiss such alternatives as nostalgic nonsense. But they are in truth the guts of a very tough late twentieth-century radicalism. American radicals must face and answer the naughty question: Do they want to manage an essentially unchanged corporate capitalist political economy as little more than especially sensitive and responsible administrators, or do they want to change the world? If the latter, then I suggest that changing the world hinges on breaking the existing system into human-sized components of space, time, place, and scale.

**A**ny consequential radical alternative must be defined by those primary variables. Let us put our minds to examining that proposition.

*Time.* Politely, we twentieth-century radicals are aging. Realistically, we are old. Candidly, we are dying. Hence we must win time in the short run so that our children may have long-range time to refine our thoughts—and add their own wisdom. Truly, it is that elementary. Hence we must concentrate our immediate political effort on stopping the momentum of egoistic, nationalistic confrontation that leads on to a nuclear war that will destroy our children and grandchildren—and abort their children. If we fail, we will destroy time. Winning time is the strategic imperative. Radicals must build a constituency on the cornerstone of time.

*Place.* The tactical and pragmatic politics of time is place. Given limited time, radicals must focus their energy in their local and regional places. Specifically, radicals in the Pacific Northwest must define and evoke a movement that says to centralized power that egoistic and mindless nuclear confrontation will have to proceed without support from a significant proportion of the population and productive capacity of this nation. We cannot rouse a continent by marches on Washington; but we can shake the establishment by stopping Boeing, Han-

ford, and related military bases and operations.

Here we get into the complicated matter of the traditional radical hang-up about religion. It would be hilarious if it were not pathetic. Consider the most striking contemporary example. There are the Mormons, those strange, communitarian, hierarchical zealots telling the government of the United States that they are against the MX missile *and* the immoral arms race. And here we radicals are whining about our impotence. Can you imagine what we could do in Washington and Oregon if we organized a similar coalition? But no, we have a fixation on saving everything at once.

Religion, after all, is just another word for community. Religion and community have to do with shared values and a daily commitment to those values. As the Mormons demonstrate, if you want to stop the nuclear nonsense, then you begin by stopping it at home.

The Mormons are in effect crying a loud *amen!* to Edwin P. Thompson and his colleagues and supporters in Britain and Western Europe. Those millions of people, by no means all of them radicals, are saying *no*: they are saying that they refuse to acquiesce in the centralized and arbitrary definition of their time and place, their space and scale, as a "theater" for so-called limited nuclear warfare. Even the lead editorial of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* of April 26, 1981, grants the central point: "The orthodox creed for a generation" has produced this result. "The armouries have never been so gigantic. The talks to reduce them have never been so ineffectual."

American radicals have been much too slow to call the bluff of those who mumble-jumble on and on about limited nuclear war. It is not enough, not enough at all, to argue that selective tit-for-tat nuclear exchanges will quickly escalate into death to all living things. We must confront the proposition that the black-box minds in the bunkers will remain superrational for an indefinite period.

That brings us right back to the old homestead. For surely the Pacific Northwest is as much a theater for limited nuclear war as Western or Eastern Europe. Boeing and Hanford are unquestionably as important as any Russian centers west of the Urals. So let us play seriously at this game of "limited" theater nuclear warfare.

First we exchange reciprocal missiles into Western and Eastern Europe. Then we launch some from England into high-priority targets in the Ukraine, or perhaps farther north. (There is a gentleman's agreement, of course, to preserve historic monuments—living as well as limestone, managerial as well as marble—in Moscow and Washington.) So in the logic of linkage we lose Seattle and Hanford for Leningrad and Murmansk.

Granted, it is all very civilized. Nothing so crude as instantaneous suicide. If we radicals take all that seriously, as we should, then we can perhaps recognize the importance of organizing each American theater just as Thompson and his

associates are organizing Western Europe. If our rulers have finally gotten around to understanding the importance of regions, so perhaps we can do the same. The immediate radical objective is to withdraw those regions—those theaters—from the strategic war plan. The issue is no longer a matter of “Hell, *no*: We won’t go!” It involves the plans and the willingness to close down operations that make each and every region a theater for limited nuclear war.

Beyond that, American radicals must redefine the nature of the unthinkable. The unthinkable as nuclear war was always a shell game without any pea. American leaders thought about the bomb, built the bomb, and used the bomb—twice. And threatened to use it once again more times than we know. Our ignorance defines our impotence.

The *truly* unthinkable is to change the system that has brought us to the brink of collective capitalist suicide. The unhappy truth of it is that American radicals, along with American liberals and conservatives, have always lusted for saving the world. We have no tradition of leaving other people alone in order to find ourselves. We have always defined *our* purpose as bringing *them* up to *our* level. What nonsense, what arrogance, what lack of any sense of ourselves! We have failed to imagine, let alone realize, any conception of how to live. We are terrified of the present and so flee ever forward into the future. We have no comprehension of space and scale.

*Space and scale.* These two elements of a radical alternative are so closely related that they must be explored together. First, they establish the importance of creating a demographic and economic balance, and of defining social equity as the *quality* of life. Now the *quantity* of disposable income (to use the contemporary capitalist idiom) is a legitimate if desperately limited benchmark for evaluating the performance of any political economy. That is the essence of what capitalism calls the standard of living.

It has become abundantly clear, as we have watched the decay of a once superb railway system, for example, that radicals have all too easily accepted the capitalist definition of the standard of living grounded in individual income statistics as a basis for thinking about a socialist political economy. Even if one agrees that the concept of individual disposable income is a useful tool for measuring the performance of any system, it nevertheless remains true that disposable income involves social as well as individual pleasures. And radicals have not made it clear enough—not at all clear enough—that taxes spent for first-rate education (for all ages) and public services from sanitation to transport are likewise disposable income.

When people increasingly choose to dispose of more of their income on private rather than social purchases, the quality of life begins to decline along an exponential curve. And, having failed to develop a clear radical conception of the quality of life, and to advance it with clarity and vigor, radicals forfeit a great

opportunity to confront capitalism with a devastating critique.

The vital issue of socially disposable income dramatizes the central importance of space and scale. For in all probability the principal reason that people have turned away from spending a significant portion of their disposable income on social purchases involves two interrelated reasons:

First, the increasingly narrow adversary politics that determine social expenditures (e.g., the airlines versus the truckers versus corporate agriculture versus outsized cities versus education versus the military).

Second, and intimately related to the first, the increasingly abstract nature of politics itself due to centralization, bureaucratization, and the nearly mindless oversimplification inherent in centralized mass communications. Politics has become theater, the *illusion* of reality, whereas it should be the *essence* of reality.

American radicals have been extremely reluctant—if not overtly afraid—to confront those issues save in esoteric analysis. The explanation, I suggest, lies in the particular kind of centralized nationalism and internationalism that radicals inherited *and accepted* from Bonaparte, Lincoln, and Marx. So long as radicals continue to operate—thinking as well as practicing—within that idiom, they will become increasingly irrelevant because they have ceased to be radical.

Hence I want to propose an alternate approach and a different agenda. It is not a manifesto simply because manifestos come at the end, not at the outset, of suggesting other questions and tentative answers.

My basic proposition is this: American radicals must confront centralized nationalism and internationalism and begin to shake it apart, break it down, and imagine a humane and socially responsible alternative. It simply will not do to define radicalism as changing the guard of the existing system. Hence these proposals.

1. Radicals must initiate and sustain, in each local, state, and regional arena, an active dialogue (including standing for office) about how to define and implement a balance between resources and population, between town and country, and *within* each of those elements of the political economy. In that process radicals must insist, as Jane J. Mansbridge has so powerfully argued, upon moving beyond adversary democracy (the crude business of vectoring out the input of special-interest groups) to create a human-scale participatory democracy to establish priorities and procedures at each of those levels of everyday life. From my experience, many people would like to reassert control over their community affairs. But given their impatience with such fundamental politics, they have turned to irrelevant conservatives.

2. Here radicals are treading water, swimming in air, walking on fog. A few left-liberals have fondled the idea of a new Constitution, but radicals have not even imagined calling another Annapolis Convention (which led to our present Constitution). It is a sad state of affairs. The conservatives are closer to call-

ing a Constitutional Convention to balance the budget than radicals are to imagining a new instrument of government.

Go back to the Mormons. They organized a relatively small number of people in a specific geographic area. The result was power. If radicals were to do the same around the idea of a new and different America, then a Constitutional Convention would become a serious possibility.

Radicals would have to begin with a modern version of *The Federalist* papers. They would have to imagine a different conception of democracy. It would have to be done without any federal grant, and it would necessarily involve a lot of time talking with nonacademics. But I have a hunch that it would ultimately involve more people than the Moral Majority has bothered to count.

Such a dialogue must be explicitly pointed toward restructuring American society into a confederation of regional governments based upon proportional representation and the parliamentary system within each region and in the confederation itself. The various regions (and here it seems wise to begin by accepting the Federal Reserve districts because they honor state boundaries) would duly elect representatives (and shadow counterparts) to a confederation parliament charged with the duty of producing a new basic instrument of government. That Constitution would begin with the Bill of Rights and move on to such matters as common law, the public ownership—but regional allocation—of social resources, and the negotiation and enforcement of interregional economic agreements.

Once such a Constitution was ratified, the confederation parliament would be primarily concerned with handling interregional affairs and the conduct of foreign policy. The creation of such a system would decentralize power, diffuse and drastically reduce the bureaucracy, and—most important—create a far more democratic politics.

3. And so we come to foreign policy, as much the bane of radicals as of liberals and conservatives. Most radicals have never broken free of the inane conception of foreign policy defined by “isolationism” and “internationalism.” But stated bluntly, the purpose of foreign policy is to enable a culture to proceed with its self-determined development within its legitimate boundaries. Saving the world is neither a rational nor a morally justifiable objective of any society’s foreign policy: it is instead authentic evidence of nationalistic egomania.

Which is to say that if, *by the force of its self-contained example*, any given culture prompts other peoples to emulate its values, procedures, and institutions, then it earns no reward beyond the duty to honor even more carefully its principles and practices. It has no right to create an empire in the name of protecting its foster children. Parents, after all, are charged with freeing, not smothering, their offspring. Elementary. Stop arming the bastards and the people will get rid of the bastards. The arrogance of presuming to define what is average repression is almost beyond one’s comprehension. The best one can do, really, is to reduce

it all to black humor. Feed the computer with the statistics on slavery, subsequent treatment of all black and white poor, and add the information on First Americans and all immigrants. Then ask the computer to give us a comparative ranking on human rights. As a historian, I will give you very long odds that we Western whites will come out below the median.

Sum it up this way: Social revolution is *not* terrorism. At its very worst, social revolution is a desperate attempt to stop terrorism. At its best, it is an effort to create a new set of moral and institutional arrangements designed to make it possible to live more humanely. The outsiders who intervene in social revolutions always lose. It is not so much that the locals ultimately assert their power. It is that the outsiders lose their self-respect. Not all at once. But down the years, over all the dead bodies, the rationalization of empire in the name of freedom kills the soul. That is as true for radicals as it is for liberals and conservatives.

4. But, given all that, there *is* a serious question about foreign policy. How does a regional confederation conduct foreign affairs—including providing for the mutual defense? It would do so structurally by creating a foreign office ever so closely watched over by a shadow foreign office staffed by the elected members of the current regional opposition.

Here I anticipate the obvious question or objection. The conduct of foreign policy, we have been taught as an article of faith, requires the delegation of power—including the authority to act quickly and forcefully without general consultation. But my reading of history belies that proposition except and unless the culture is conducting an *imperial* foreign policy. My understanding of contemporary technology supports my contrariness. Given a radical reconstruction of American society, the local, regional, and continental institutions could discuss and decide all but one issue of foreign policy with time to spare.

The exception, of course, is a nuclear Pearl Harbor. And here, particularly during the transition to a new America, I think radicals would have to be ruthless. We would have to speak a simple, blunt truth to the world—be it Russians, Chinese, Arabs, Israelis, or whoever. We are making a true revolution. Do not interfere. We will launch an appropriate counterattack on confirmed evidence that you have initiated *any* assault that threatens the integrity of our revolution.

**N**ow of course you can dismiss all of this as utopian. I am frankly more than less inclined to agree with you. There are not today enough Americans, radical or otherwise, ready to confront Bonaparte, Lincoln, and Marx. Indeed, someone ought to write an essay about the transformation of the conception of the frontier: from going out in fear and trembling in the hope of creating something different into simply projecting the present on down the line. That was, it

seems to me, the sad nature of John Kennedy's New Frontier. Not only no imagination, but no conception of utopia.

Face it: the purpose of a radical utopia is to create a tension in our souls. Our first responsibility as radicals is to create a knowledge, individual and then social, that what we are doing is not good enough. Then we must imagine something better. That defines us as people who offer our fellow citizens a meaningful choice about how we can define and live our lives.