
EDITORIAL

In attempting to understand what lies in store for the country in the years directly ahead, nothing is likely to be less helpful than the words of the new President. He is plainly an unpolitical animal, uninformed, and with a mind and sensibility that are faithfully reproduced in the banality of his speech and observations. It would, however, be a serious mistake to conclude that his will be a caretaker administration, more concerned to soothe than to take risks. There are already signs that important changes in our society are being contemplated. In trying to identify what these might be and what they might mean, the first step is to find the appropriate context for thinking about Mr. Reagan—not about his rhetoric or his personal habits, but as a symbol of the powerful men and institutions that have controlled his life from the time he became GE's salesman for the ideology of corporate America. These men and institutions are now established in the key positions of the state at a time when the economy is faltering and American power declining.

Although at this writing the precise contents of President Reagan's State of the Union address are not known, there can be little doubt that the new administration will launch a major effort to reduce government spending by paring as many social services and programs as political considerations allow. A representative list of items most likely to be effected would include: reduction of the cost-of-living increases as provided under social-security legislation; limiting federal contributions to health care for low-income people; curtailing unemployment insurance; reduction of the jobs programs authorized under CETA and of the assistance to workers left unemployed because of foreign imports; narrowing the eligibility for food stamps; and restricting the regulatory activity of agencies concerned with occupational health, safety, and environmental pollution.

These are not, of course, the only areas selected for possible reductions, but they do make for a striking pattern of deprivations aimed at the working class, the poor, and, by definition, racial and ethnic minorities. The fact that the proposals are typically couched in the antiseptic language of budgets and are justified by appealing to the authority of one or another school of economic doctrine makes it seem as though the problems are essentially economic and hence need to be addressed in the context of the economy.

But is the concept of "the economy" the proper context for understanding the implications of the cutbacks being contemplated, or should they be considered in a political context? The important stakes, in our view, are not government spending but power, the power that has become available to ordinary people only during the last half century. The proposed cutbacks represent more than a reduction in expenditures; they are an attack upon entitlements and services that were won only after a long struggle, and a reversal of the historical developments that established these social services as essential rights. What is at stake are not "costs" but the necessary conditions for living with some hope and dignity. Rights to health care, education, unemployment payments, and safe conditions in the workplace do more than protect or secure the individual: they are the conditions of his autonomy and power.

When the proposed cutbacks are linked with well-publicized strategies for extracting wage reductions and "give-backs," the picture that emerges is not of an "economy" but of a political struggle in which state power will be used to weaken the many and make them more amenable to "discipline." Discipline is merely a shorthand expression for the submissiveness that spells power to those who administer it. The meaning of discipline will be obscured by attributing it to the market mechanism. In fact, it is simply another way of talking about "governability," which has become the new political virtue of the masses when capitalism is reduced to austerity as the means of solving its problems.

The responsibility of those who care for democracy is to expose the political consequences hidden under economic reasoning, and to insist that economic concessions on the part of workers should be made only in return for real power over the structure of the economy at every level. If we are all to be incorporated into a political economy, then let it be a democratic political economy.

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