

CHAPTER 15

A Democratic and Totalitarian or a Genuinely Democratic Society?



WE MUST DISENTHRALL OURSELVES

Lincoln's Socialization

“We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country.” Thus spoke Abraham Lincoln in 1862, as the nation was plunging into civil war. His words surely suited those times; they fit ours considerably more. He also spoke eloquently at Gettysburg, in 1863, giving us the timeless phrase that saw the USA as “a nation of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

“Honest Abe” was not indulging in what today we call *spin*. No, he was not seeking to deceive the people of the country. But he was deceiving himself. If we think of enthrallment as self-deception or as the unthinking acceptance of ideas and attitudes provided us by others, Lincoln did indeed have a problem.

What produces enthrallment may otherwise be seen as *socialization*. It has taken hold throughout history—whether in Ancient Greece, or in Lincoln’s or our USA. Socialization is those experiences “from womb to tomb” that cause us to accept or oppose, to admire or despise certain ideas, people, means and ends—which, as we come to take them for granted, become our definition of *normal*, to which we habituate ourselves. “The normal, proper and just” is what Gramsci saw as the thralldom of society’s ideological hegemony. That is, people were dutiful and obedient servants of the conventional wisdom, common sense, and the status quo. (See Chapter 12.)

What Lincoln had come to see as proper and just was the subjection of blacks by whites—and slavery (sort of). In 1858, just 2 years before he became president, he had this to say in a speech in Illinois:

I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races [applause];

that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office nor to intermarry with white people....

Then in 1862, as president, in a letter to the Editor of the *New York Tribune*, Lincoln wrote:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all of the slaves, I would do it ; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do it.

Two months later, still in the midst of the war, when he issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln promised to leave slavery untouched in states that came over to the North. And he kept his promise: The five slave states occupied by the North (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri and Virginia) were allowed to retain their slaves.

At least as troubling was Lincoln's ongoing solution of "the race problem." It was to have all blacks transported "back to Africa." But by his time (and apart from other considerations), only a small minority of the U.S. black population had ever seen Africa. Just where in Africa they would be deposited and what was supposed to happen to them then was not specified. And, naturally, the black population itself was never consulted in the matter.

Black people were *not fully human* for Lincoln; nor were they for those who wrote the Constitution—or for all too many other whites. The makers of our Constitution saw the slaves as two-thirds of a man and allowed slave *owners* to vote for them. (All of the foregoing quotations and information may be found in Zinn's remarkable *People's History of the United States*, Chapter 9.)

Needed: Change Within

"*We must disenthral ourselves*"? But from what? What is it that we must *unlearn* so that we can clear—and clean—our minds, learn anew, and work at bringing our nation toward good sense and decency?

For starters, all of us must courageously plumb the depths of *our* thoughts, feelings, and behavior as regards *our own* unthinking acceptance in some degree of the major *ism's* shaping the USA and its peoples for so long: racism, sexism, consumerism and selfish individualism, arrogant nationalism and militarism—and, yes, the mindless capitalist misuse of industrialism.

We will then come face to face with our acquiescence in corruption on all levels of society; and thus, to some degree, we will be forced to acknowledge

the corruption of ourselves. We will also be better able to understand why most others—whether on the left, center, or right—have acquiesced in or supported policies harmful to us and much of the world. In doing so, we will be able to gain-say the common inclination to think that those who disagree with us are *stupid*. In fact, some who disagree with us may be *too* intelligent: Kissinger, Wolfowitz, and Karl Rove, for example.

To disentrall ourselves is, in effect, to become our own psychoanalysts. It is bravely to look in the mirror to search out the mote in our own eyes. If we do not find the strength to do that, neither will we gain the strength to bring others to see what has become of our country. And the USA will continue its race toward degeneration and self-destruction.

Of course, it may do so anyway, no matter what *we* do; the task ahead is truly awesome. All the more reason to do everything that must be done. *Now*.

DON'T GIVE UP HOPE

In facing the need to undo most of our ingrained habits of mind, one of the first places to begin is to overcome what it means to be political. And that need is especially important for those ranging from the “moderate” center to left of center. And, as will soon be stressed, it means a great deal more than keeping up with the news and voting.

The first thing we must do is *not* give up hope. Clearly, what the USA does both at home and abroad lurches from bad to worse in a set of processes that have become always more arrogant and dangerous since Bush’s re-election. His neocon circle of imperialists and rugged individualists have interpreted a narrow and still-disputed victory (preceded by a steal) as a mandate. They seem to think, and so it seems to many who despise them, that they are unstoppable. But are they really invincible? Who knows that they are? Who holds the infallible ex cathedra crystal ball? Whose tea leaves are you going to believe?

To assert or aver Bush & Co., Inc.’s unstoppableity is to presuppose that the future is predictable. It never has been, and in today’s world it is much less so. The mix of interacting and mutually transforming economic, cultural, political, military, and scientific and technological variables has always been analytically forbidding. Even in, say, the slow-motion of the eighteenth century, it was essentially impossible to fully understand what the future held. Today things are more complicated, moving faster, more unstable. No one understood the future then, no one understands it now. Accurate prediction is impossible, whether one is

tapping a building full of computers, looking at a crystal ball, reading tea leaves, or inquiring of the all-knowing Magic 8 Ball.

In today's 24/7 world, with U.S. hegemony weakening by the week, with a fragile global economy, with *Jihad vs. McWorld* (Barber), with China's economic and political strength zooming, to predict even month-to-month changes of any substance is impossible. And year-to-year? Some lucky guesses, *maybe*. But would you want to bet your life on them?

So you can't say the Bush regime is invincible. Therefore, a fortiori, we must not give up hope. Recall Gramsci's epigram: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

It is essential for people in the USA who detest and fear what is now going on to pause and ask what is required of us if we are to become politically effective. For most of us, that has meant keeping well informed, voting, and perhaps, participating in demonstrations for this and against that. All of that is of course essential. It is also seriously insufficient.

U.S. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: AN ASSESSMENT

Among the strongest societies in the world, we alone have never had a persisting *social movement*—that is, one that has worked for more than a narrow program. Political involvement in the USA has always been for a *particular* group, or against a *particular* policy. The closest we have come to a *genuine social movement* have been the Populists of the late nineteenth century, the trade-union movements, and the civil rights and antiwar movements since World War II.

A brief assessment of the results of those movements in terms of where we stand today reveals that all were inadequate for their particular ends, and much more is needed today.

In all of those past cases not only was the focus too narrow, but most importantly, at the same time, our efforts were weekend or destroyed by their acceptance of one or more of our nation's major defects: of racism, sexism, nationalism, or competition. We will look at those movements, very briefly. (A reading of Zinn's *People's History* is an excellent place to find the details—and further references.)

The Populist Movement

Populism took hold in the late nineteenth century, sparked by the small farmers of the Midwest and South. They had been increasingly exploited by, first and

foremost, the railroad monopolies (and, soon, by market speculators). Their ranks were added to by factory and mine workers. Their efforts to form unions were being vigorously and ruthlessly opposed. The power of business in both cases was great; it was much added to by the divisions among workers, most especially on racist grounds.

Unions

Early on, the unions that managed to come into something like a sturdy existence were entirely those of the highly-skilled, such as carpenters and electricians. When they became joined to each other in the American Federation of Labor, they called themselves—without derision—“business unions.”

They were “white” unions, and unions of *men*. Although unions are now less exclusionary, there remains a long way to go, if worker solidarity rather than worker hostility is to become the norm.

Civil Rights

The mostly black civil rights movement *had* to be narrow in its beginnings, concerned with few other issues. Yet even with that narrow focus, it was difficult enough, indeed seemingly impossible in the 1950s and 1960s, to achieve even the right to *register* to vote in the South, let alone to use “whites only” toilets or be served at coffee counters. Moreover, its ultimate accomplishments in jobs, education, health care, and politics went well beyond what seemed even imaginable in those earlier years.

Put differently, it was not *the fault* of the black people that they did not seek to form a *social* movement of the kind needed then and today; the difficulties of even modest change were great enough.

But it is important to note that once progress was made, the black community itself became more divided than it had been earlier. Now not only is there a distinct *middle-class* black community (often hostile to impoverished blacks), but both they and the poor are less active politically now than they were, say, 50 years ago—for “their own” or the nation’s needs—even as racist wrongs now mount and for blacks and others.

The Vietnam Antiwar Movement

The movement to terminate the Vietnam War was a huge success—up to a point. The war ended, the USA had in effect to admit defeat (as it urgently helicoptered some of its staff off the roof that day in 1975).

That war did not end because of the great successes of the antiwar movement—at least, not directly. The strength and activities of the movement had begun a serious decline in the early 1970s, coincident with Nixon’s clever ploys of ending of the draft and the “Vietnamization” of the war:

Let the ‘gooks’ do the fighting on the ground; reduce the U.S. ‘grunts’ toward zero. And, as our aerial bombings and civilian deaths multiplied: the most lethal years of the war were *after* our troops got out. (See Young.)

But the war ended, didn’t it? It did indeed, but only because Nixon was forced to resign because of the scandals of Watergate. Taking his place in the White House was the weakling Gerald Ford (who guaranteed Nixon there would be no charges). Ford was weak in more ways than one: He was once characterized by LBJ as a man who “couldn’t chew gum and cross the street at the same time.”

As one on the steering committee of the Mobe (as the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam was called), the principal organizer of antiwar demonstrations from 1966 until the war’s end, I recall well what happened when the draft was ended. The number of people working with us and the numbers participating in our demonstrations plummeted. Understandably, but still sad to say, the earlier numbers and fervor had evidently been based much more on personal than political considerations. Very “American.”

Nor is it encouraging to have to recall that the AFL-CIO as such *never* came out against the war; if anything, the opposite. Our demonstrations and parades were often dangerous places to be, given the behavior of those who identified themselves as members of a given union, throwing rocks, wrestling marchers to the ground, etc. Reasonable behavior perhaps, considering that many saw their jobs as depending upon military production. Still...

Is there something I have omitted? Did I miss our apology to the people of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam for the irreversible destruction and derailing of their societies; or for the deaths of over 3 million of their peoples because that war? Will we ever apologize?

COUNTERACTING COMPETITION, EMULATION, AND CONSUMERISM

Like it or not, not only in this country but on this globe, we are all in the same boat. That is so difficult for us to understand and, because so few understand

and act upon it, it is all the more difficult to keep that boat from being sunk—because those in it are thinking about something else.

One of the most destructive of our behavior patterns is the *exaltation of competition* in the USA. As noted so many times earlier, *of course* we are not alone in that; but we win the first prize, hands down. (We should congratulate ourselves: We've won the *competition* competition.) Soon after our beginnings as a nation, competition began to be venerated, between businesses in the same industry and among ourselves.

As a people, we are prone to *rank* ourselves, in our work, in our play, in our appearance, in our children, in...everything. We are the invidious people, par excellence. And when we are outranked, we have learned to seek to appear as though we have not been—through what Veblen called “emulation.”

[T]he propensity for emulation is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper. In an industrial community... emulation expresses itself in pecuniary emulation...[which] is virtually equivalent to saying it expresses itself in some form of conspicuous consumption and waste. (1899)

At least half a century before today's consumerism could take hold, Veblen anticipated the ways in which emulation would infect us with selfish individualism and the senseless greed that keeps our economy “healthy.” That *health* is supported by something over the \$250 billion annually spent on advertising in the USA, its aim to induce compulsive buying and (massive) borrowing to pay for it.

No matter that the success of such advertising requires both adults in well over half of all families to have full-time jobs; no matter that this means their children, with or without child care, are watching TV an average of 6 hours daily; no matter that the average household starts each month owing more than it receives; no matter that the result is *the joyless economy*, no matter that a free-swinging government, controlled by those whose interests are dangerously at odds with those ruled, is allowed to be so by an electorate combining apathy, stupefaction, and ineffectual rage.

Should all of the foregoing make pessimists of us? No. Once more: Pessimism implies predictability. But if prediction is always of necessity muddled by a mix of uncertainties, today it is all the more so—except for the existing and emerging crises. They need no predicting, for they are already underway and cannot help but worsen—unless we unleash ourselves politically.

Put the economic and politico-military tensions together, add in the soon-to-be crisis of vanishing oil—which will bring economic and military tensions together in a deadly embrace—and we are looking at a fearsome world; more fearsome, it should be understood, than that which immediately preceded World War I.

ONE WORLD OR NONE AT ALL

Unless we see *the whole earth* as our locus, any victories we might win will be deceptive. Like it or not, we now live in *one world*. It is by no means the one world some hoped for after World War II. What evolved after 1945 instead was what, as the 1990s began, President G. H. W. Bush saw himself as presiding over—that is, “the new world order.” Or as F. Fukuyama cheerfully saw it, “the end of history,” the ultimate triumph of centuries of capitalist globalization.

A New World Order?

As noted in the discussion of The Big Four, “the new world order” was called something else in its earlier manifestations: *colonialism*, then *imperialism*.

In all three stages, recall that the capitalist nations were seeking to satisfy their inherent need for continuous economic expansion. That in turn required (among other things) continuous geographic expansion, because it gave access to scarce resources, cheap labor, markets and possibly the advantages of getting there first. The qualitative transformation from one stage to the next was provided by technological changes of always greater strength, depth, and impact. Each stage began—and the first two ended—with always more destructive wars.

All along, the critics of those processes were protesting the ways in which the associated changes were destroying cultures and traditional economies and bringing into being a new savagery for the peoples of the weaker societies.

More than 150 years ago, Marx and Engels saw the *need* for workers of the world to unite. But then the politics and technologies of the world did not allow the world’s workers to unite. Now it *is* possible, and now they *must* unite. Or perish. But *possible* merely means a probability greater than zero—*yes, it might happen*—but it does not mean the task will be easy.

But isn’t it too much to focus in on the entire world? Isn’t organizing even one nation difficult almost beyond belief? Indeed that is so; but in today’s world the *lack* of a genuine unifying spirit and structure would be an invitation to national as well as international disarray, degeneration, and disaster.

It must be said again, and understood: *It is now one world or none at all*. The key reference points are two: war and the environment. As matters now stand, nuclear war now seems to be almost inevitable; as does environmental disaster. When? Do we have 5 minutes or 5 years? Or does it matter whether it is 25, 50, or even 100 years from today?

Alas, as matters now stand, it matters not at all. U.S. public opinion seems to say: “So long as it won’t happen in *our* lifetime, ishkabibble. *What, me worry?*” That’s a recipe for certain doom, because it is giving up on the struggle.

A Better Society

It is vital first to specify who *we* are, for purposes both of identification and as a basis for developing our political strategies. The question is thus better put as an operational question, “What do we need and, therefore, for what and with whom shall we work?”

To think of working for that one world is, of course, too much to ask of those in one nation, least of all *this* nation. *But it is possible*—and more plausible than it seems at first sight.

Of course we really can only work politically in our own society. As will be seen now, however, the needs specified below, as pursued for the USA, should and would link the satisfaction of our environmental and our own basic needs.

That being so, the kind of governments *we* would be electing—local, state, and national—would be composed of so-called “public servants” (like waiters— isn’t a waiter literally a public servant?) whose domestic policies would be consonant with the most desirable foreign policies. In both cases, the United States would be on its way toward becoming what it has seen itself as being but has never been: a nation of the people, by the people, and for the people—and one that understands that we are among the peoples of the world who are in the same boat.

Assume that who *we* are has been clarified sufficiently to at least allow useful discussions. Now we move toward the translation of *wants* into *needs*.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

The USA is a *very* rich society. There is no acceptable reason for there to be anyone in this country who does not have access to adequate nutrition, health care, education, housing, or opportunity. (See Stretton; Daly.)

So it is quite simply disgraceful that many millions of our people do *not* have

the ability to satisfy those needs through their own jobs and incomes. Equally disgraceful is that the gap between need and reality is not even closely filled by existing governmental policies. We stand alone among the rich countries in our scandalous mistreatment and undertreatment of our people in all of these respects.

Again, as the USA gets richer, the lack of access worsens, both for those already in trouble and for new arrivals (because of the restructuring of the workforce and the weakness of unions). Increasing U.S. riches brings an associated deepening of inequality and poverty.

That such has been and remains so in the USA can be explained by the effective combination over time of the hopes attached to the American dream, the virtual absence of any serious inclination toward political action by all but a small percentage of us, by the baneful effects our racism and militarism and, more recently, by the tendency of consumerism to distract our attention from anything more serious than buying and *having*.

Nowadays, however, for *most* of our people, rather than promising the traditional “onward and upward” the future seems instead to be threatening the opposite. As our economy offers always fewer good-paying jobs in manufacturing (with benefits) and more in the low-paying service sector (with no benefits), the consequence is that a solid majority of the population is facing something resembling an endless nightmare. (See Finnegan, *Cold New World*.)

It will probably take a serious jolt to awaken enough of us to build a substantial movement. If and when that occurs, because of a deep economic or military crisis, there will *not* be an automatic, even a likely, coalescing toward a political *movement for the better*. That movement has to be created—*starting now, by us*—before disaster strikes.

There *will*, however, be a set of immediate responses on the part of those in power. They will do all they can to preserve their power by maintaining or exaggerating their policies. The grotesque economic policies *they* have seen as desirable already have been patently harmful to most people. It is frightening to imagine what they would come up with *in a serious crisis*. Bush & Co. has shown the gut instinct to wreck the economy, attack civil liberties, and go to war. What nightmares would they wreak to *preserve* their power?

What you and I do and would see as severe damage, they will continue to see as proof positive of their administrative genius—and go full speed ahead. We alone can save ourselves alive.

INDIVIDUAL GROUPS ARE NOT A MOVEMENT

There are already literally thousands of political organizations in the USA. Almost all concentrate their efforts on a particular, relatively narrow aim.

As the term is used here, groups with a *relatively narrow aim* would include, for example, groups that are fighting for universal health care, for racial and gender equality, for unionism, for environmental safety...None of these seem narrow to their participants, and some who work hard in one also work hard in one or more of the others. All of that is necessary; all need more members and more support than they now possess. Put differently, none has succeeded in its aims, and all face the probability of more weakness.

How can anyone possibly do more? One answer is to enlarge the membership in groups by putting in more time and effort. At least as important—more so, in this connection—is to understand that a major reason for the weakness of our many political organizations is that those who do that work let their political work begin and end with “their” organization (plus voting in elections).

And that is a major reason all such groups are in a weakening process. “In unity there is strength” is something of a truism; but it is also one that seldom if ever is lived up to politically in the USA. Worse, there is all too common a tendency for those who work hard on one issue to view other groups as competitors—vying for limited financial support, for a finite pool of members, in elections, and so on.

UNIONS: UNITE!

To understand how we keep ourselves unnecessarily weak, a quick look at our trade union history is relevant. It was always difficult for workers to build a meaningful union. Business was against it; the law was against it. (You could have a union, but it was illegal to strike until the Wagner Act of the 1930s). Racism and sexism weakened the efforts, and unions almost always fought their battles separately.

Until the battles that began in the 1930s had been won, believe it or not, the USA had *no* minimum wage or maximum hour laws; *no* laws against child labor; *no* unemployment compensation; *no* paid vacations; *no* pensions; *no* employer-financed health care. When people did have any of those needs met, they were executives—or simply rich.

After the early unions became federated into the AFL and the industrial unions of the CIO emerged and then merged to become the AFL-CIO, for the first time in the history of labor, workers came to have positive political strength—and they could often be the deciding factor in elections. (The reduction in union strength in both numbers and politics is well discussed in Zinn.)

The joining together of separate unions is what is essential now if we are to have an effective social movement—the joining together of those fighting for realization of the basic needs noted earlier, for stronger unions, for environmental safety, for peace, and for the USA to play a helpful rather than harmful role in the so-called “developing countries.” (It is very likely to become *more* harmful role with the appointment of Wolfowitz by Bush to be head of the World Bank.)

Cooperation, to say nothing of solidarity, has only ever existed here and there, now and then; it has been “un-American.” Now we *must* learn to be cooperative.

That doesn’t mean agreement on everything—one doesn’t do that even with loved ones. We’re not cows. Cooperation means probing for what is essential and what is not in working with others—essential for all of us as human beings and essential if we are ever to have the power as a people to decide what our society could and should become. We must learn that we are in fact all in the same boat.

WHAT THE PROGRAM WOULD LOOK LIKE

Getting down closer to earth, what would our program look like? How would we define our *ism*?

In earlier pages, I have been strongly critical of various *ism*’s, such as racism and sexism. Here I believe it necessary to be critical of an *ism* that many who read this have seen as very precious, and that is *socialism*.

When socialism has been talked about it these days, it has been as *really existing socialism*, as an attack on Soviet, or Chinese, or Cuban socialism. For many reasons, most of them dead wrong, *socialism*—alas!—has become a dirty word. Since socialism is designed to *take care of people*, this pejorative usage is akin to making the word *love* a four-letter word (such as in the Ministry of Love in Orwell’s *1984*).

This book may be seen as an attack on *really existing capitalism*. The structures needing change are precisely the structures *actually existing capitalism* depends upon. Withal, at present it seems both undesirable and unnecessary to work hard

for *any ism at all*. For good reasons or bad, anything with an *ism* attached to it is seen as undesirable, ineffective, pie-in-the-sky, smelling of sulfur, or simply contrary to day-to-day practicality.

In any case, we do not need to use an *ism* to define what we seek, no matter what its history. What we can and must work for, if life is to cease to become worse and more dangerous for most, are changes in the structures of production, of consumption, of income and wealth and status—and, therefore, of power. (For a different, but compatible, point of view, see M. Lebowitz, *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century*.) To the degree that we make progress, we will be moving toward a *noncapitalist* society.

TOWARD A COMPLETELY DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

What we *name* the society we are working for (or what we call our *ism*) is not important, so long as we are working toward a society that is democratic in all of its being: culturally, economically, politically, socially. The society will be one that recognizes the need for us to see ourselves as part of nature, not as its heedless master. It will be one that sees the people of other societies as having the same basic needs, and given half a chance, the same possibilities as ours. For our part, we must participate (not dominate) in giving them that chance.

And we must insist that *war is not even the last resort*. It only becomes so if people are not allowed to live as we can and should.

As I have written elsewhere, most of us in the USA (and other rich countries) work always harder to pay for things that add little to the meaning or satisfaction of our lives. In doing so, we contribute to a global system that has already destroyed countless lives and that threatens to end all life on the planet.

Many decent and thoughtful people have been taught to think there is no reasonable alternative. But there is—if and only if we dedicate ourselves to bringing it about.

The late and beloved Daniel Singer put it well in the closing words of his last book, *Whose Millennium?*

On the ground littered with broken models and shattered expectations, a new generation will now have to take the lead. Chastened by our bitter experiences, they can advance with hope but without illusions, with convictions but without certitudes, and, rediscovering the attraction and power of collective action, they can resume the task, hardly begun, of the radical transformation of society.

But they cannot do it on their own. We must follow their lead and, to the dismay of the preachers and propagandists shrieking that the task is impossible, utopian, or suicidal, and to the horror of their capitalist paymasters, proclaim all together: “We are not here to tinker with the world, we are here to change it!” Only in this way can we give a positive answer to the theoretical question asked in this book: whose millennium, theirs or ours? It is also the only way in which we can prevent the future from being *theirs*—apocalyptic or, at best, barbarian.

If not now, when? If not us, who?

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