

Liberalism

Introduction

Liberalism is one of the major problems facing the communist movement today. Here we present two arguments on this most important topic, each dealing with various aspects of liberalism. While these arguments are not intended to be all-inclusive, they do, we believe, contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon and assist in the elimination of the problem. The second article is a reprint of a chapter contained in Breakdown* by Robert Briffault, one of the truly great social scientists and political analysts of the current century. While there may be some disagreement with a few specifics of his argument, we strongly urge a careful reading of the position set forth here. As well, we find the work in its entirety to be most helpful in understanding the complexities of modern capitalism. Lastly, Briffault's "tone" strikes us as the correct one to carry into ideological battle: it is precise, learned, and most important, angry. If one is not angered by the injustices of exploitative society, then it is almost impossible to develop the will to carry out the tasks necessary to eliminate that society. Briffault, like Lenin, was angry.

*New York, Coward-McCann, 1935.

The Threat of Liberalism

In modern capitalist society the primary trend of political ideology is liberalism. By this we obviously do not mean tolerance in the sense of having sympathy for some disadvantaged individual or group. One should be tolerant, say, of retarded children. It is true, however, that liberalism as a political tendency does contain a large measure of toleration in a negative sense as will be explained below. Nor do we mean the liberalism of the 18th and 19th centuries, in which liberalism merely connotes individualism, which is carried into the present day by such groups as the Libertarian Party and individuals as Friederich von Hayek. As employed by such notables, the work in the present context stands for reaction though, again, there is a relationship between these two meanings. To facilitate a correct understanding of liberalism for purposes of analysis, we quote a modern authority on the subject:

The declared aim of liberal thought is, in brief, to amend traditional civilisation while preserving it, to persuade engines of war, that is, sovereign states, into refraining from war, to bring about the social organization of mankind through the kind of offices of anti-social interests, to evolve cooperation out of competition, the good of mankind out of predatory profit, to produce white by the mixture of various shades of black.
(Briffault, Breakdown, pp. 171-2)

Unlike conservatives who desire a certain constancy of current arrangements or reactionaries who want to retreat into (a usually imaginary) history, liberals argue for, and promote change--but change within well-defined limits. Essentially liberals want change within the existing capitalist social structure; they sense that capitalism requires modification of an ongoing nature if it is to survive as a social system and that this modification

must, to some extent, be forced on the capitalists-- in their own best interests. Basically, liberals want capitalism to work better and if that means allowing certain concessions to the working class, then, so be it. And it is this promotion of concessions that forms the foundation of delusion for liberal ideology.

It is necessary to distinguish the professional liberal from that of the naive variety. Most individuals who hold a liberal ideology do so without understanding the nature of that ideology or its limitations. They are honest people who truly desire a decent society and who do hold real sympathy for those considered "less fortunate". They don't want war, they do want social justice in some sense. The professional liberal is an altogether different animal. This is the individual who develops liberal ideology and policies, not on the basis of ignorance as does the naive liberal, but with knowledge of the nature of the capitalist system, its injustices and the class basis of its social relations. The professional liberal uses this knowledge in the pursuit of deception, the express purpose of which is to misdirect potential threats to the ruling class thus facilitating that class' rule. And it is with this segment of the liberal population with which we are concerned here.

The professional liberal parades under a democratic facade, this is obligatory if the liberal is to be successful in implementing an ideology supportive of exploitation, which requires the oppression of the majority and the maintenance of a social system which favors a handful of the population. It is important to understand, however, that the liberal is anything but a democrat in the sense of believing in or fighting for rule of the majority, the working class. The professional liberal must constantly fight against democracy because he is ideologically and politically a partisan of a minority ruling class which rests on exploitation. Lenin addressed the situation with liberals in Russia between 1905 and 1917:

The liberal is afraid of the movement of

the masses; he tries to check it and deliberately defends certain institutions of medievalism...as a bulwark against the masses, particularly the workers.
(Lenin, "Political Parties in Russia", p. 51)

But this progressive bourgeoisie dreads the democracy and the movement of the masses even more than it dreads reaction. Hence the liberals perpetual tendency to make concessions to the old, to compromise with it, to defend many fundamental mainstays of the old order. And all this makes for the complete impotence of liberalism, for its timidity, half-heartedness and eternal vacillations.
(Lenin, "Cadets and Democrats", p. 230)

Faced with the choice of true democracy or reaction, the professional liberal will always support reaction. Reaction defends existing exploitation while democracy undermines it. Hence, the liberal is tolerant of current injustice and is necessarily tolerant of the ideological system which supports that injustice through its conscious fabrications which distort and conceal reality and thus lead to false consciousness. Under the rubric of liberal toleration, the liberal is "willing" to accept a bit of dishonesty, a bit of hypocrisy--a bit of murder. In fact, this toleration is nothing more than a thinly veiled ruse for assisting the ruling class in its constant struggle to continue its domination. What better manner in which to maintain this rule than to convince the underlying population to be "tolerant" of this class and its injustices? Obviously, if one tolerates injustice one is incompetent to do anything to eliminate that injustice.

Predatory Reformism

Liberalism functions under a somewhat deceptive appearance in that liberals do promote minor changes. However, the purpose of change for liberals is to head off or misdirect major changes, i.e., working class movements. For example, within established religion in the 1960's, church liberals understood that the hold the church maintained over the population was being eroded by the strong anti-war and civil rights movements. To halt this trend, they argued for modernization measures which included placing the church in the forefront of these movements. Ostensibly, the church committed an about face; actually, this enabled the church to misdirect these movements and lead them into "safe" channels. Thus, what was accomplished was a strengthening of the traditional oppressive apparatus of the church which can only function if the church has some degree of credibility. Current proposals for economic reform, including planning at the aggregate level, which emanate from such noted liberals as John Kenneth Galbraith serve the same general function. Obviously, the economic system is in serious trouble. The problem is to modify the nature of the economy so that some of the difficulties might be eliminated, but without touching the very heart of the system--exploitation. Should the economy continue to deteriorate, more and more of the working class will become disillusioned with capitalism and will become potential revolutionaries. Hence, the liberals are instructing the capitalists to make some adjustments in the way they run the show or the show may not go on at all. Another such example is the anti-nuclear war movement which, under liberal leadership, has been subverted into the nuclear freeze movement. Here is a political tendency of the current period which has a large number of advocates. It provides an excellent opportunity to expose capitalism and its warring tendencies and to demonstrate that only a fundamental change in the social system can, in the long run, prevent war. Therefore, it becomes imperative that communists

not seize the leadership of this movement; that liberals step in to prevent the movement from becoming too radical. For example, reporting on the June, 1982 rally in New York City, it was pointed out that the liberal leadership of that rally, including Physicians for Social Responsibility, feared that the grassroots movement might be "co-opted" by the left. (Time, June 14, 1982, p. 24) One of the most important political points these liberals accentuate is the identification of the Soviet Union as equal to the United States as a threat to the survival of humankind. Hence, "socialism" is equated to capitalism and both are shown to be equally culpable, equally bad. (Though under capitalism, we still have our political rights, thank God.)

At its highest level, liberalism encompasses social democracy (in its present sense of that term). The most liberal of liberal ideology, social democracy overtly appears anti-capitalist, even to the point of carping about exploitation--the argument being that the rate of exploitation being too high. In the United States, the recent "Economic Democracy" movement of Tom Hayden is indicative of this tendency. As with the older forms of social democracy, the Fabians, German Social Democrats, Mensheviks, the function of the new organizations is to misdirect the working class away from class struggle toward class appeasement. The recent organization of managing boards in various factories consisting of managers, labor "representatives" (coming from established unions), and government officials is one such example of the thrust of this political program. (See, Carnoy and Shearer, Economic Democracy, for an elaboration of this program.) This liberal infestation of the socialist movement and the resulting corruption was something that Lenin constantly warned against. (See, "The Liberal Bourgeoisie and the Liquidators".)

The dominant ideological thrust of liberalized social democracy is the same as that of liberalism in general: The underlying assumption is that classes are reconcilable, in fact that classes don't really exist at all, and that current problems are the result of stupidity, ignorance, or evil individuals. The

solution, thus, is to use the ballot to elect decent political representatives who have the welfare of the whole people in mind when they sally forth to do their duty. The whole point of their argument is to lead the working class into purely reformist movements, thus reinforcing the liberal ideology already implanted through the normal channels of communication.

In the present period one of the greatest threats of liberalism in the socialist movement occurs in the national liberation movements throughout the colonial system. Such movements represent an alliance of various classes in those countries, notably workers, small producers (in particular peasants) and the native bourgeoisie which is attempting to gain some modicum of independence from their imperialist masters. The liberal position will be carried into these independence movements primarily by the representatives of the capitalists, but also by peasants, the point of which is to prevent these movements from falling under the leadership of communists who will obviously push it in a socialist direction. The extent that the communist portion of the alliance allows and falls under the direction of the liberal capitalists will determine, in the main, the outcome of the liberation struggle. If the liberal ideology and political position dominate, the result will be (at best) an independent, but capitalist society. In practice, though, as it is impossible for the capitalists of a newly formed capitalist country to become and remain independent of world imperialism, the real, long-run result will be the maintenance of the old colonial structure but in a new, more liberal, form. Hence, it is imperative that Lenin's admonition to separate the confirmed liberals (capitalists) from the potential democrats (the small producers) be followed and that these small producers be won over to the working class position. (On this, it is most instructive to carefully compare Lenin's, "Two Tactics of Social Democracy" and Mao's, "On New Democracy" which is ostensibly nothing more than the application of traditional Marxist-Leninist theory to the conditions of China. In fact, it is clear that Mao does not separate the population into the tradi-

tional Marxist categories and does not differentiate the liberals and democrats. It is a fundamentally liberal analysis.)

In the final analysis, professional liberals are not liberal, they only appear to be so. They are intolerant of anything that is basically democratic. They literally foam at the mouth when confronted with these positions. True, liberals will tolerate a conservative or reactionary position--these support capitalism. But they will not be "liberal" with regard to Marxism--the only consistent democratic ideology. Given that the fundamental purpose of the liberal position is support for capitalist society, for injustice, for exploitation, they fight tooth and nail to prevent a Marxist position from becoming dominant.

Conclusion

The primary ideology of capitalism in its monopoly stage is liberalism. In that this ideology renders unmitigated support for capitalist society and its institutions, it is an oligarchic ideology. It is also an ideology of individualism. In this sense, it bears a similarity to the liberalism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Then, liberalism was overtly individualistic and promoted the interests of the small, competitive capitalists in their progressive period. Now, given the domination of large, oligopolistic capitalists who retard social progress, the individualism of modern liberalism is false--it does not correspond to the interests of the small businessman. Instead, it represents just another smokescreen behind which oligopolistic oligarchy (instead of competitive oligarchy) can hide and pretend to be democratic. Thus, it continues its role as a defender of capitalism against the threat of socialism or democracy, the rule of wage and salary earners.

As this is so, liberalism must be fought at every opportunity and liberals must be exposed for what they are--supporters of oligarchy and enemies of democracy. At the same time, naive liberals can be educated and eventually won over to a Marxist position. As these individuals have no vested inter-

est in the maintenance of an oligarchic social system and do believe themselves to be democratic, the exposure of liberalism in their ranks can only serve to assist in bringing about a correct understanding of reality. At the same time, the professional liberals must be exposed and attacked. It must be demonstrated to those who are honest and who can be educated to socialism that the professional liberal is not a friend, but an enemy. And, in the present period, the primary enemy is social democracy, liberalism within the socialist movement. As with the period of Marx and Engels, as with that of Lenin, this capitalist ideology and political program parading as that of the working class must be ruthlessly warred upon. It's continuation can only serve to prevent the long-run formation of a decent society. ■

References

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