

THE CENTER AND THE LEFT

MICHAEL NOVAK

IN THE Democratic Party, both the center and the left have serious problems. These problems are both political and spiritual.

The center has no credible body of future-oriented ideas toward which to point—or too few such ideas. It is also embarrassed by elderly but still-active leaders, who do not project a sense of forward movement, men like George Meany, Richard J. Daley and even Hubert Humphrey. That such leaders are in better touch with their people than George McGovern was has now been proved. But that they have ideas for bettering the lot of their people over the next ten or fifteen years is not at all plain.

The left prides itself on its ideas: its revisionist history of the cold war; its analysis of America as a destructive, imperial, capitalist power abroad, in the grip of a power elite at home; its moral identification with "victims" and the "oppressed"; its assault on *machismo*, competition, duty, and work, and its attachment to the pleasure principle; its aggressive secularism; its fierce bias against ordinary Americans. (For this kind of emotional and institutional reaction, I suppose we should have a name to set alongside racism, elitism, sexism and militarism. I propose classism. The left is classist in its contempt for small-town Protestants and urban Catholics and lower-class Jews.)

So many members of the new class, never quite attaining the public status they would like, are consumed with the very class resentment of which they accuse others. "America is sick," they say; "doesn't even know enough to die." In words sweating contempt from every pore, they describe the hatred, alienation and divisiveness of other Americans.

Many on the left write as Catholics used to, from a position of siege.

There is a remarkable coincidence between the attitudes and practices of new left vis-à-vis America and that of Catholics of a generation ago. The dangers of secularism and materialism were never so effectively denounced by Cardinal Spellman as by Marcus Raskin. The established elites that link Harvard, the Council on Foreign Relations and foreign policy were never so soundly denounced by Father Ginder as by Richard Barnet. It is an opportune time for conservative Catholics to piggy-back on "radical" criticism without so much as a change of resentment. The wonder is that many liberal Catholics have been picking up the same cant.

But of course part of what the left says is true. Many of its facts, figures and interpretations about the distribution of power and the direction of self-interest in the United States are accurate enough. It is the philosophical *context* in which these findings are set, on the one hand, and the *class basis* they rationalize, on the other, that qualify them. Concentrations of power and interest mark every known society of the past and present. Societies are always "immoral," fall far short of "Paradise," of "the kingdom," of justice, liberty and truth. Societies fall short, not for accidental reasons, but for at least three reasons inherent in the human situation: scarcity of resources, the inequality of individual character, and the fallibility of the human heart. A fourth reason is more complicated in statement: it is difficult enough for one person to treat a single other with full sensitivity, complete insight and accurate fairness—to treat hundreds (or millions) of others so, as institutions must, is beyond human capacity. Given the inevitable grossness of institutional procedures, societies always operate by standards different from those of a personal

morality.

Secondly, the dreams of a good society implicit in the writings of classists are not only illusory; they are also rationalizations of the interests of a new class, privileged in affluence, mobility and education, and undisciplined by the need to acquire or to administer wealth and power. The new class has a parasitic status. That status is the root of its anxieties and feelings of guilt. For its own hedonism, leisurely life and room to think, it is utterly dependent on a society of abundance produced by the labor of others.

The class basis of the center and the left is so different that perhaps the Democratic party would be better served by dividing, into two parties. As a family's affluence went up, so (according to the polls) did the probability of its support for McGovern. Many old, comfortable families that used to lead the northeastern Republican establishment are now to be found supporting the "new politics"—John Lindsay and Ogden Reid are merely the public tip of the iceberg. ("The Greening of America", after all, appeared in the *New Yorker*.) Then there is the "new wealth" generated by the new technologies since World War II; thence, "radical chic."

The class basis of the center of the party is the urban working class—that 75 percent of the population whose income is below \$15,000 per year. Militant media-oriented blacks tend to side with the left; but most black leaders and people seem far more comfortable with the center—with Hubert Humphrey, for example, rather than George McGovern. In terms of class perception and long-range interest, this preference makes sense.

Many Americans dislike the term—
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nineteen hundred years and selects from among half a dozen literatures, for it would invite us to see these figures responding to Jesus as a poet—rather more, of course, than *primus inter pares* in the community of Christian artists—and not only as a source of doctrine. After all, John Milton's famous statement that Spenser is a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas means, fundamentally, that a poet offers a more congenial model than a philosopher for another poet to imitate. For that very reason, we should indeed like to understand the poetic Jesus.



Michael Novak (Cont.)

inology of class. But the realities to which it points are inescapable. Father Hesburgh recently commented that the busing issue was a number-one phony issue. But he and other civil rights leaders made it so. They turned support for busing into a kind of loyalty test of liberalism. From the very beginning they should have minimized the issue—come out against busing except in rare, exceptional circumstances. For, in fact, as Father Hesburgh went on to say, less than 2 percent of all school busing in America is for purposes of racial balance. We could probably pass a law *forbidding* any more than 3 percent of all school busing to be for purposes of racial integration, and still fulfill our needs in that respect. So why did the left make it an issue?

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Why didn't it long ago *condemn* busing, except in the extraordinary circumstance?

But if the ordinary citizen watched television these last four years, he saw busing incidents on the evening news time after time after time. The broadcasters were carrying their civil rights crusade—"enlightening" the public—into every neighborhood. It felt like a universal program. If in *that* town today, why not here tomorrow? That's the way liberals argue about even a single civil liberties case.

Well, one reason people work very hard, and deny themselves many luxuries, is to move into a neighborhood where there is a better school for their children; or else to keep up their own neighborhood against all the normal erosions of modern cities, including unregulated ethnic and racial migrations. Status in America comes from the quality of a neighborhood, not least from the quality of its schools. People stake their lives upon such interests. To go against such interests by compulsion is to undercut the class structure of American life. It is to violate the unwritten law. No wonder people react with outrage. It is naïveté to call busing a phony issue. It is as real and jugular as you can get.

But the left always wants it both ways: To be more moral than thou in proposing and defending busing as a loyalty test on civil rights, and then to be more moral than thou in saying busing is insignificant and your fears are irrational.

From which I conclude that the future aims of the democratic center must be worked out in terms of class as well as in ethnic terms. Affluent radicals may feel as though they belong to an oppressor class, but all those citizens living side by side in little square houses in Queens, Kensington, Parma and Warren do not feel like oppressors. In their lives are all the evils to which humans are prey—ugly feelings, resentments, greed, corruptibility—but also there is a beauty to be enhanced, a wealth of spiritual resources to be tapped, a generosity to channel, a political passion to lead forward.

CORRESPONDENCE

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portant relationship between sexual control and authority in the Catholic church. The structure and command system of the church as we know it depends to a large extent on tight sexual mandates and sanctions. For example, the ruling groups are characterized by celibacy. Also, much of the laity's conscience adherence to the church has revolved around issues of strict sexual observance regarding contraception and other sexual matters that traditionally made up the weighty items for confession. If the church moves to looser guidelines on these questions, it will not mean a new golden age of renewal. But it is quite clear to me (and to the conservatives who hold the reins today) that the structure and authority network of Catholicism would change drastically if the church let up on sexual control.

EUGENE C. BIANCHI

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