

EDITORIAL:

Old Right / New Left

Mr. Murray Kempton, one of America's most perceptive journalists, attended the annual December, 1965 convention of the National Association of Manufacturers at the Waldorf, and found himself unexpectedly wistful about the good old days when the NAM spent a good portion of its energies attacking governmental interference with the individual. Instead, he found the NAM praising Administration officials, and found himself disgruntled at the change, in short at the passing of the libertarian "Old Right" spirit that used to pervade that favorite whipping boy of the Old Left. Indeed, Kempton saw the NAM fitting smoothly into the current military-industrial complex:

Ever since the 'thirties, power in the NAM used to center in the middle-sized companies. . . Most of them (their presidents) are gone now; they have been replaced by representatives of the major corporations whose biggest customer is government, which, as the biggest customer, has a claim to be if not always, at least often enough, right. . .

NAM's new permanent president came there from the General Dynamics Corporation, a company which was organized on the basis of confidence in the favor of government. The new NAM is also described in Thomas Mechling, its recently-appointed director of information and a discovery of Thomas B. Watson, Junior. Mechling is best remembered for his lonely struggle as a liberal Democrat against the late Senator Pat McCarran in Nevada.¹

Kempton keenly noted the irony of the fact that

1. Murray Kempton, "Laughter at the Waldorf," The New Republic (December 18, 1965), p. 20.

the only criticism of NAM's new orientation to be heard all week came from a New Left student at Yale Law School, who came to interpret the student rebellion to the leaders of industry. And the burden of the criticism was that NAM was no longer living up to its Old Right ideals, which, the student implied, were now being carried forward by the student rebels of the New Left:

"If you were listening," he said, "you might find that the Students for a Democratic Society and the NAM were in part saying the same thing. . . I had thought that this organization spent much of its time warning of the consequences of a too-powerful central authority for a system in which the individual is the supreme concern.

Perhaps many of you have changed your mind, under the guiding hand of Consensus and Cost plus Six percent; perhaps the GNP has erased your concern for what might happen to people when they are no longer responsible for themselves. The student rebel, however, believes in democracy, not just in free speech, but in bringing into the political process all those left out by poverty, bigotry and technology. . . Call that radical if you will. I prefer to regard this as a belief in the dignity of man; a belief I hope many of you still may share."

The delegates warmly applauded this expression of the pieties they had abandoned.²

Another perception of the linkup of Old Right-and-New Left came recently from one of the major theoreticians of the New Left, historian William Appleman Williams, of the University of Wisconsin. On November 5, Professor Williams delivered an address before a predominantly Old Left audience at an anniversary dinner of the National Guardian. Though an avowed socialist, Williams displayed a keen understanding of the cul-de-sac the American Left had reached by identifying itself with the movement for centralized bureaucracy and the Leviathan State. First, Williams implied that the Left must abandon its Marxist mystique of the working-class, and include the great middle-class in its ambit:

2. Ibid.

Community is an inclusive conception, and an inclusive practice. In the true and deep sense, a community includes my father-in-law who wrote in the name of Johnny Birch on his last presidential ballot, as well as my 83-year-old neighbor who did the same for Eugene Debs. . . . If Martin Luther King can include white segregationists in his vision of an American community, then American radicals ought somehow to be able to include the middle class in their vision.³

Williams then went on to analyze the cul-de-sac that radicals had gotten themselves into by pushing American society into a "centralized and consolidated" corporate state, a state and society structured and governed by a cozy coalition of conservatives and liberals. Instead, Williams emphasized, radicals must break completely with the conservative-and-liberal program of centralized corporate welfare capitalism, and plump whole-heartedly for decentralization:

The core radical ideals and values of community, equality, democracy, and humaneness simply cannot in the future be realized and sustained--nor should they be sought--through more centralization and consolidation.

These radical values can most nearly be realized through decentralization and through the creation of many truly human communities. If one feels the need to go ancestor-diving in the American past and spear a tradition that is relevant to our contemporary predicament, then the prize trophy is the Articles of Confederation. . . .

Such decentralization is technologically and economically possible. Such decentralization is essential if democracy is to be maintained and extended. And such decentralization is psychologically and morally mandatory. Our humanity is being pounded and squeezed out of us by the consolidated power of a nationalist corporate welfare capitalism.⁴

3. "Williams on policy for U. S. radicals," National Guardian (November 27, 1965), p. 6.

4. Ibid., p. 7.

Williams then went on to define specifically the relationship between his proposed recasting of the American Left and the libertarian Old Right credo which he saw (probably over-optimistically) in the Goldwater Movement:

Such decentralization also provides American radicalism with the most exciting and creative vista upon a different and a better America. The validity of this is ironically attested to by the handful of tough and shrewd old 19th century conservatives who have already beaten the radicals to this perception, and have in less than five years evoked from Americans of all generations a response that frightens and concerns the majority.

It is probably a harmless convention to talk at cocktail parties about the Goldwaterites in terms of their status problems, but it is a highly dangerous habit to think seriously about them in that fashion. They want participatory democracy pointed toward the very concrete restoration of 19th Century laissez faire. Or so they think, because that is what their reactionary leaders want. But in truth most of them want the welfare state cut down to human size, and structured in terms of community. And that is precisely what relevant radicalism would offer as its bedrock appeal for a constituency.

Professor Williams' thoughtful striking out in new directions has met the fate of all intellectual pioneers. On the one hand, the Right-wing, which treats the New Left only in terms of sinister conspiracy or petty and irrelevant aesthetics (the charge of "beatniks", etc.), has ignored the speech completely. On the other, Williams has aroused the conditioned hysterical responses of all the hidebound guardians of the Old Left, who could only see in Williams a Bircher, a Goldwaterite, even--ultimate curse of curses--a Nazi! Thus, one Norval Welch of New York City:

It is no coincidence that, in Williams's opinion, the 'most exciting and creative vista' he longs for has been offered by whom? -- the Goldwaterites! . . .

Are our memories so short that we have forgotten where romantic socialism leads? Did not the unemployed and demoralized Germans, 1929-1931, also long for a "new order" along "socialist" lines?

Henry F. Mins also saw something sinister in Williams' insistence on forming a community with his Birchite father-in-law, and concluded that Williams was only advocating a "corn-fed variety of ethical culture"; and Sophia Kutey of the Bronx could only throw up her hands at the whole thing and urge Professor Williams to go and study Lenin's "Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder," a response typical of Marxists who are unable to grasp a new idea.⁶

The ideological walls in America are crumbling fast, and regrouping and reforming almost as rapidly. The keepers of the flame of the Old Left are as much doomed to obsolescence as are the swaggering fire-eaters of the New American Right.

5. In National Guardian (December 11, 1965), p. 8.

6. Ibid. (January 22, 1966), p. 2.