

# VIII. Notes on the Revolution and the 1930s

WHAT ABOUT REVOLUTION in the 1930s? To display a revolution not begun may be more hazardous than to show an unfinished picture. A preliminary look at finished revolutions can be helpful.

Like humdrum human events, revolutions do not end where they begin. Revolutions are distinguished by the degree to which their ultimate attainments transcend the modesty of their initial impulses and objectives.

In the revolutions of the eighteenth century — the American and French — the progression from the beginning was impelled more by the logic of events than by the informed foresight of human consciousness. When the shots were fired at Concord and Lexington the American colonists did not realize that in little more than a year's time they would be waging war for independence instead of fighting for the redress of grievances as loyal subjects of the British Crown. And when the Bastille was stormed neither the mass of Parisians who joined the assault on the prison-fortress nor the nominal leaders of the incipient revolution anticipated that in less than four years the revolution would lop off a king's head at the top of the social pyramid and destroy the foundations of feudalism at the bottom.

Even then the appearance of pure spontaneity was deceptive. The thinkers of the Enlightenment had undermined the ideological rationales for feudal society and supplied the ideas and rhetoric for the emerging bourgeois order. And in the course of the revolutionary conflicts some participants perceived their nature more quickly and pushed with greater determination to the limits of the historically possible. So in the British colonies

Tom Paine helped create the popular consciousness that was given formal expression in the Declaration of Independence, and in France the Jacobins were most relentless in the insistence upon the most thorough demolition of feudal power.

Ideological make-ready and the appearance of vanguard elements in the eighteenth century were not of the same order as in the major popular revolutions of the twentieth century — the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban; the latter were distinguished by the qualitatively different prior consciousness of ultimate destinations among organized revolutionaries. Their awareness of revolution as a process did not dispense with the process, but it certainly enabled them to accelerate it, to act with greater purpose in projecting new objectives and more revolutionary means for their attainment.

In Russia the revolutionary progression was remarkably swift and clear: from the overthrow of the Czar (i.e., the rule of the feudal nobility) and the establishment of a bourgeois democratic republic in March 1917 to the overthrow of the bourgeois regime by the working class and its allies in November and the proclamation of the Soviet Socialist Republic. Although actual events, as Lenin noted, were “more original, more peculiar, more variegated than anyone could have expected,” the development “on the whole” confirmed the Bolshevik perspective. In the Bolshevik program the overthrow of Czarism by a bourgeois democratic revolution was the indispensable precondition for subsequent advance to Socialist revolution. And if a unique constellation of circumstances made it possible to traverse an entire historical epoch in the brief span of eight months, undoubtedly Lenin’s revolutionary genius and will were decisive in the leap from possibility to actuality.

In China the revolution was more protracted and its nodal points were not delineated so sharply, but throughout its course its most consistent exponents drew a distinct line between intermediate objectives and ultimate destination. In the quarter of a century before the establishment of the People’s Republic one central idea was constantly reiterated (as it was, for example, by Mao in 1928): “At present China certainly re-

mains in the stage of bourgeois democratic revolution . . . We must go through such a revolution before we can lay a real foundation for passing on to socialism."

In April 1945, four months before the Japanese surrender, Mao outlined a "general program . . . for the present stage and for the entire course of the bourgeois democratic revolution," spelling it out in basic economic terms affecting property relations.

In agriculture, to further national unity in the war against Japan, the Communists had substituted for their revolutionary program of "land to the tillers" the moderate reform of reducing rent and interest. This policy was justified by the exigencies of war. But Mao went further. "If no particular obstacles turn up," he said, "we are ready to continue this policy after the war; we shall first enforce reduction of rent and interest throughout the country and then adopt proper measures to attain gradually the aim of 'land to the tillers.'"

In industry "measures will be adopted to adjust the interests of labor and capital." To protect labor he proposed "a workday from eight to ten hours . . . unemployment relief and social insurance . . . safeguarding the rights of trade unions." For "properly managed" private capital "reasonable profit will be guaranteed."

The instrument for effecting the moderate program of economic reforms was to be "a coalition government," then the principal political slogan of the Chinese Communists. And this "bourgeois democratic revolution," Mao anticipated, "may last for several decades."

In China, as in Russia (and later in Cuba), the confluence of historical circumstances speeded the pace of development. Kuomintang-Communist negotiations for a coalition government broke down after World War II. Chiang Kai-shek (egged on by powerful United States interests) forced the issue to civil war. When the Communist armies were victorious and the People's Republic was proclaimed in 1949, the Socialist transformations that followed were far more rapid and thorough than Mao had indicated in 1945.

In Cuba Fidel Castro and his colleagues in the July 26th

Movement did not produce the prior theoretical elaborations that the Russian and Chinese revolutionaries did. True, early in 1957 the word "Socialist" was used as a self-descriptive term by Castro in an interview with Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times*, and it also appeared in a July 26 statement. But its usage was vague and enveloped in ambiguities so that the distinction between an a priori conscious purpose and "spontaneous" response to events is not easily discerned.

However, the initial goals proclaimed by the July 26th Movement came under the heading of what the Russians and Chinese called bourgeois democratic revolution. These goals included restoration of the Cuban Constitution of 1940 and realization of Cuban independence, political and economic. Proposed radical reforms in agriculture, industry, education, and social welfare did not transgress the essentially bourgeois democratic limits of the 1940 Constitution. Not until two years after the conquest of power was the revolution formally designated as Socialist; by then the label came after the fact.

Indeed, the contrast between the relative moderation of the original July 26 program and the Socialist course of the revolutionary government has been cited in accusations that Castro betrayed the Cuban revolution. But that is something like reproaching Lincoln for betraying his election promises of 1860 by signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Exigencies of revolution in Cuba (not least of which was Washington's hostility) were no less compelling than the exigencies of civil war in the United States. It is Castro's merit that his revolutionary consistency subsumed an apparent inconsistency in political program. And in a fundamental respect the inconsistency was more apparent than real; to realize the original objectives (most notably Cuban economic independence from the United States), it was necessary to transcend them. At this stage of history it is a patent illusion to conceive of a Cuban capitalism that would not inexorably become dependent, economically and politically, upon the capitalist colossus to the north. Therefore the elementary bourgeois democratic right, national independence, required a Socialist regime for its substantiation.

The preceding capsules of several revolutions are not novel. And the point they illustrate is not original. Still it is worth repeating that a key issue in any strategy for Socialist revolution is discernment of the transition to it, the delineation of intermediate objectives en route to the ultimate destination. In the contemporary revolutions mentioned, the transition could be defined with relative ease. Russia, China, and Cuba were burdened with problems that in the advanced capitalist countries were solved essentially (if not completely) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such problems as economic retardation rooted in an agrarian economy hobbled by feudal or semifeudal institutions and relations, national independence and unification, despotic rule. These problems provided the initial impetus in the transition, for in the twentieth century they could not be solved in the same way as they were in preceding centuries. And so Socialist revolutionaries undertook to perform historical services that in times past were performed by revolutionary bourgeois democrats, but being Socialists they did it differently and always with the awareness that such chores (eliminating feudal backwardness and oppression, consolidating national independence) were preconditions for realizing their ultimate goal: Socialist reconstruction of society.

In the advanced capitalist countries there is not the accumulation of the same problems to provide the flammable material for revolution. Transition to Socialist conquest has proved to be more elusive, more complex. For more than a century the best, most consistent, and dedicated revolutionary minds have contended with this problem, and their efforts have not been crowned with empirical success. These efforts represent a staggering expenditure of human thought, energy, devotion, courage, and sacrifice from the generation of Marx and Engels to the two generations since the emergence of the modern Communist movement in 1917–1919. With this background anyone who approaches the problem of revolutionary transition in an advanced capitalist country would do well, it seems to me, to do so with modesty (and this is so irrespective of seniority or the lack of it).

Without peremptory judgments and a priori assumptions it

would be most useful to study thoroughly and thoughtfully the very rich accumulation of experience, contending ideas, varied tactics, trials and errors, failures and successes (although for a revolutionary movement any success short of its ultimate goal is of necessity tentative and qualified).

In the United States the 1930s warrant special attention, for in many respects that decade marked the most advanced and sophisticated attempts to cope with problems of revolutionary transition. Unfortunately, however, many younger radicals view that decade as one big mess of blunder and opportunism that is best skipped. And even those who are not prone to such sweeping dismissal, who believe something may be learned from that decade, most often fail to approach it with the objectivity and concreteness that would be truly productive.

One might begin with the origins of the overall Left strategy of "United Front" and "People's Front" that took shape in the mid-1930s. This strategy was two years in the making, from Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933 to Georgi Dimitrov's report to the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in August 1935. The tragic debacle in Germany confronted the Left with questions. Why did it happen? How can similar catastrophes be averted? I remember how compelling these questions were for me and my immediate associates, how we welcomed the "People's Front" as the appropriate answer. To us it seemed the strategy of marshaling in one common front all forces opposed to fascism grew out of the anxious search in which we, along with millions of others, were engaged for two long years.

All this was brought back to me recently by the curt characterization of the People's Front as a Kremlin manipulation in a book by one of the more thoughtful and scholarly younger radicals, David Horowitz. His treatment was not original, of course, nor was my response. How different, I thought, is history as living experience.

My subjective reactions at the time might have little bearing on the origins of the People's Front, but there is also objective evidence. In France the Communists began to apply the

United Front policy in municipal elections in 1934. In fact, they were called up on the carpet for it before committees of the Communist International. In the same year the Communist youth organizations in the United States and France pursued what was, in effect, a Popular Front policy. (In the United States this policy guided Communist participation in the American Youth Congress, initially sponsored by such figures as Eleanor Roosevelt and New York's Mayor La Guardia; the young Communists sought to transform the congress into a formation that would unite the younger generation against fascism and war.) The American and French Communist youth leaders were under intense pressure in the Young Communist International to abandon their course and to acknowledge it was mistaken.

Such initiatives, undertaken when they still were at variance with official positions of the Communist International, demonstrate that the United Front and People's Front were sprouting at the grassroots before the Soviet Communists exerted their hegemonic influence in the final, authoritative formulation of the program that embraced these tactics. Indeed, in his concluding address to the Seventh World Congress Dimitrov acknowledged the importance of the French initiative in the decision-making process.

"We have not invented this task [creation of the People's Front]," he said. "It has been prompted by the experience of the world labor movement itself, above all, the experience of the proletariat in France." He added that by their pioneer united front "the French workers, both Communists and Socialists, have once more advanced the French labor movement to . . . a leading position in capitalist Europe . . . It is the great service of the French Communist Party and the French proletariat that by their fighting against fascism in a united proletarian front they helped to prepare the decisions of our Congress."

That, I believe, was no pro forma tribute. I was persuaded then (and still am) that Dimitrov's report articulated thoughts and conclusions of millions on the Left, Communists and non-Communists, all over the world. Certainly the energy and en-

thusiasm generated by the People's Front policy would indicate it was no externally imposed manipulation, that it accorded with Left assessment of political realities and needs in the respective countries. Of course the Popular Front dovetailed with the Soviet diplomatic pursuit of a collective security arrangement with the capitalist democracies to isolate and constrict the Nazi regime, either to strangle it in peace or defeat it swiftly and decisively if it resorted to war. But if one is opposed to dogma, one also should reject the dogma that anything conforming with Soviet interest automatically contradicts interests of the Left in the rest of the world.

With the passage of time and no little obfuscation, a definition of terms might be useful. As initially formulated United Front and People's Front described precise class alignments. United Front meant united action of the working class, and in the first instance of its political parties, Communist and Socialist. The People's Front was originally defined by Dimitrov as "a fighting alliance between the proletariat on the one hand, and the toiling peasantry and the basic mass of the urban petty bourgeoisie, who together form the majority of the population even in industrially developed countries, on the other." (In other renditions he included intellectuals in this formation.) In the United States the Dimitrov formula was modified to read: "a coalition of the working class, the toiling farmers, Negroes, and middle classes against capitalist reaction, fascism, and war." This was the constant formula and it should be noted it did not include capitalists, liberal or otherwise.

As projected the political platform of these fronts, United and People's, called for defeat of the Fascist threat and prevention of the world war then in the making. From the beginning, however, those formations were related to a transition to Socialist revolution.

In his report Dimitrov remarked, "Fifteen years ago Lenin called upon us to focus all our attention on 'searching out forms of *transition* or *approach* to the proletarian revolution.'" It may be that in a number of countries the *united front government* will prove to be *one* of the most important transitional forms." (The italics are Lenin's and Dimitrov's.)



In the United States a couple of years later Earl Browder discussed transition in more general terms. "Certainly," he said, "we are not indifferent to the problem of 'transition' from a victory over fascism to victory over the whole capitalist system, 'transition' to socialism. But the transition does not come from empty slogans, disconnected from everyday life. This transition arises upon the basis of the growing strength, organization, discipline, fighting power, and understanding of the working class, which gathers around itself as allies all other oppressed strata of the population — a working class which has learned how to meet in battle its worst enemies, today the Fascists and the monopoly capitalists, and to defeat them on the immediate issues of the day. It is not a discouraged, defeated, and demoralized working class that will take up and realize the great program of socialism; it is the enthusiastic, victorious, and organized workers who will move forward from victories in the defensive struggle to the offensive, and finally to socialism. Every strong defense passes insensibly to the offensive. To stop the retreat means already to prepare the advance. The defeat of fascism is the first precondition for the victory of socialism."

The mischief in the conception of an *insensible* passage from defense to offense will be dealt with later on. Here my concern still is with the larger transition. It was only touched upon in the above citations, speculatively by Dimitrov, and by Browder with generalities. Such treatment was symptomatic of the tentative and limited approach to the issue of transition in the formative phase of the People's Front strategy. What was consciously said about transition, it seems to me, is less than what was objectively inherent in the People's Front. Inherent was the kernel of an idea that, in my opinion, is indispensable to any fruitful search for forms of transition to revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. I would outline this idea as follows:

Bourgeois democracy arose as the political extension and reflection of free economic competition, suggested in the commercial imagery of the phrase, "a free marketplace for ideas." The operative term is "marketplace": a free marketplace for commodities, a free marketplace for ideas. In the beginning,

property qualifications for holding office and voting officially stamped existing political institutions as arenas in which propertied interests freely competed. Popular struggle and movements expanded the franchise and modified this arrangement; without minimizing the significance of these modifications, still the power of property was sufficient to retain the essential character of the arrangement, to validate the characterization of the democracy as bourgeois.

With the advent and growth of monopoly, however, economic competition became and becomes increasingly restricted. Inevitably this economic reality finds its extension and reflection in the political realm, just as the former reality did in capitalism's salad days. The old rhetoric and the old forms are retained where possible because they are hallowed by tradition and invested with legitimacy, but the content is different. Increasing centralization of power (paralleling the increasing concentration of economic power) is characteristic of advanced capitalist countries. Occasionally, as with the Pentagon Papers, a glimpse is afforded of the clandestine, manipulative exercise of power by a tiny clique. Also prevalent are two significant tendencies: imposition of controls upon the working class to restrict the right to strike and to depress wages, and mounting subsidies for "technological renovation," which are, in fact, subsidies to cultivate and strengthen monopoly. (The economic logic is simple: "technological renovation," especially with contemporary technology, means machines and enterprises producing and marketing on an ever vaster scale. This, in turn, inevitably means bigger and fewer giants in each branch of industry.)

In a sense, the economic-political development has a cyclical character. Capitalism, in its advanced age, reverts to attributes of its childhood. In the beginning such vices as political despotism and economic constraint were embodied in feudal institutions; today similar vices, but in different forms necessarily, are embodied in the financial and industrial oligarchies. If in the economically backward countries of our century the initial impulse to Socialist revolution originated in the assault on feudal despotism and constraint, is it not possible that, in the

industrially advanced countries, a similar impulse is to be found in assault on the comparable impositions of monopoly?

Recognizing vital differences in the two sets of circumstances, I still believe the answer is affirmative. Historically the People's Front was a pioneering effort to cope with the complexities implicit in the above question. It was a beginning, characterized by the trial and error that marks all beginnings. Mistakes and opportunistic compromises that attended implementation of a People's Front policy in the United States ought to be analyzed, criticized, and even condemned, if you will, but for maximum usefulness such exercises ought to confront the vital kernel in the People's Front concept.

In the spate of criticism heaped upon the People's Front there is much nonsense and a serious argument. Typical of the nonsense is a historical hallucination in which the working classes of the advanced capitalist countries (including the United States) were straining to make a Socialist revolution but were inhibited and diverted by People's Front projection of fascism, not capitalism, as the immediate target. Only two things are missing from this vision: (1) any serious conception of what makes revolution and (2) any serious comprehension of the relevant realities in the United States. As to the first point no one has improved on Lenin's observation that revolution is possible "only when the *'lower classes' do not want to live in the old way and the 'upper classes' cannot carry on in the old way.*" Certainly President Roosevelt, utilizing the considerable economic reserves of United States capitalism, displayed the flexibility and skill to go on ruling in the old way (his reforms did not change the essence of rule). And his massive support among those sectors of the population that presumably should have been most ready for revolution (i.e., the working class, the black people, the unemployed) showed they had not concluded it was impossible to go on living in the old way.

The sophisticated critique of the People's Front began with an absolute truth: capitalism breeds fascism; only destruction of the source can irrevocably eliminate the consequence. Appended to this impeccable logic was a dubious addendum: by focusing on effect (fascism) rather than cause (capitalism) the

People's Front did not effectively come to grips with either. Most directly this argument centered on priorities of sequence in a given historical moment but it also joined more enduring issues: the relationship between the specific and the general, between the immediate and the ultimate, between beginning and end. And all these are essential issues of transition to revolution.

To me it seems the argument inverts beginning and end; it contravenes the historical experience of revolutions, all of which progressed from intermediate to ultimate objectives, and it also is at odds with what occurred in the 1930s. The call to an anti-Fascist front evoked a powerful response; it generated enormous political energy and motion. It represented a politics in which the Left moved, influenced, and led millions. It stimulated new levels of organization and alignment, new levels of consciousness, activating large numbers of people previously apathetic or, at best, on the periphery of political and social conflict. It provided the framework for rich and varied practical Left experience in mass organization, tactics, relationships between different classes and social groups. And this initial People's Front period, it must be remembered, lasted for only four years, 1935–1939, a brief moment in the historical time scale. Aside from periods of actual revolution I know of no other in which such vast political experience for such vast numbers was compressed in so short a time.

By all those signs in that particular time the People's Front proved to be an effective and viable *beginning* in the search for forms of transition or approach to revolution. If, however, the Left critics are mistaken, as I believe they are, in projecting the end (Socialist revolution) before the beginning (searching out forms of transition), there is also the hazard of confusing the beginning for the end, or more exactly perhaps of becoming so preoccupied with the beginning as to obscure the end.

This, too, can result in an absence of conscious confrontation with problems of transition. Instead it can produce Browder's thesis of the insensible passage from defense to offense. Insensible passages, being insensible, have no sense of direction. Insensibly, defense can pass to accommodation just as easily as to

offense, or it can insensibly oscillate between advance and retreat. Both accommodation and oscillation were manifested in the United States. Horrible examples have been amply cited in radical literature. Frequently these examples have been presented as inevitable consequences of Left engagement in coalitions with moderates for relatively moderate objectives. And the conclusion was drawn that Left integrity is best guaranteed by abstention from coalition politics. Instead of solving the problem, such an approach only evades it.

In the two most significant popular revolutions since the 1930s, variations of the People's Front were very prominent. Patently coalition was not a quicksand of opportunist compromise because the revolutions succeeded. The experience suggests that the problem is not, to coalesce or not to coalesce, but the character of coalition, and how the Left retains independence and integrity and exerts influence in a coalition.

Undoubtedly the most remarkable example of united front and coalition is presented by the Chinese revolution. The Chinese Communists learned about coalition the hard way. In 1924-1927 they were joined in a united front with the Kuomintang. The united front armies marched and fought from Canton to Shanghai in a spectacular military campaign to overcome feudal warlords and unify the country. When they reached Shanghai in 1927 the Kuomintang and its leader, Chiang Kai-shek, representing propertied interests and reaching an agreement with imperialist powers, suddenly ruptured the united front, turned on their allies, and slaughtered thousands of Communists or alleged Communists. In a mass slaughter political identification tends to be sloppy. Subsequently Chiang launched campaign after campaign to encircle and annihilate Communist forces that regrouped after the 1927 debacle and established base areas.

Less than a decade later, applying the People's Front strategy, the Chinese Communists made the most energetic and persistent attempts to establish and maintain a united front with the Kuomintang and Chiang, with those who had butchered their comrades and tenaciously sought their total annihilation. The emphasis of repetition is warranted: the Chinese revolu-

tionaries deliberately sought a united front with their executioners. They did so without any illusions about the ethics of the Kuomintang leaders, without any naivete about their past, about their behavior at the time or in the future.

In China, faced with aggression by Japan, the People's Front assumed the form of an "Anti-Japanese National United Front," a coalition that was proposed a few months after the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International. That the Chinese approach fitted in with the strategy outlined by Dimitrov was made clear by Mao when he said, "Not only in China but in the whole world it is necessary as well as possible to establish an anti-Fascist united front for a joint fight against fascism. Therefore we propose to establish a national and democratic united front in China."

That the united front entailed compromises was also made clear. In sum, as Mao put it, "to subordinate the class struggle to the present national struggle to resist Japan — that is the fundamental principle of the United Front." Subordinating the class struggle in agrarian China meant, first of all, muting the agrarian revolution, substituting reduction of feudal rent and interest for the distribution of land to those who tilled it. But it also meant moderating the demands of workers, necessarily so, because a united front between the Communists, the party of workers and peasants, and the Kuomintang, heterogeneous in its following but dominated by capitalist and landlord interests, was inconceivable without a mediation of contending class interests in the common objective of saving the country from Japanese conquest.

Communist persistence, pressure, argument, tactical flexibility, and selective concessions succeeded in creating an uneasy, contradictory united front with the Kuomintang. This policy extended from 1935 to the outbreak of civil war in 1946. Without going into all the twists in the eleven-year period, certain principal features may be noted.

First is the almost incredible persistence in the united front despite all obstacles, including occasional bloody armed clashes between its principals. The most notorious perhaps occurred in Southern Anhwei province in January 1941, when Kuomintang

troops, attacking suddenly, killed 9000 soldiers of the Communist New Fourth army. After this incident and several related provocations by the Kuomintang, a Communist Central Committee directive to the party cautioned, "Throughout the country . . . we must oppose the erroneous appraisal of the situation to the effect that there is already a final split or will soon be a split between the Kuomintang and the Communist party, together with the many incorrect views arising from it."

Alongside the tenacious adherence to the united front was a constant remembrance of the 1927 experience. Thus, after the Anhwei episode, a public Communist statement emphasized, "The Chinese Communist party is no longer to be so easily deceived and destroyed as it was in 1927." Indeed, except for individual lapses as in Anhwei, the party kept its guard up, was always candid in recognizing the contradiction between cooperation and antagonism in its relationship with the Kuomintang. Two themes were recurrent: the absolute necessity of retaining autonomy and independence within the united front, and what Mao termed the unity of "solidarity" and "struggle," or the principle that the united front is maintained by struggle within it. The complex duality of that last principle was illustrated in Mao's advocacy of "a revolutionary dual policy towards the anti-Communist die-hards, i.e., a policy of uniting with them insofar as they are still willing to resist Japan and of isolating them in so far as they are determined to oppose communism.

"In their resistance to Japan the die-hards are again of a dual character; we adopt a policy of uniting with them insofar as they are still willing to resist Japan, and a policy of struggling against them . . . insofar as they vacillate. In their anti-communism the die-hards also reveal their dual character and our policy should be one of a dual character, too, i.e., insofar as they are still unwilling to bring about a final breakup of the Kuomintang-Communist cooperation, we adopt a policy of uniting with them and, insofar as they pursue a highhanded policy and make military offensives against our party and the people, we adopt a policy of struggling against them . . ."

In implementing so flexible a tactic, emphases constantly

shifted. In 1935, when the endeavor for a national united front was just begun, Mao said, "The present situation demands that we boldly give up closed-door sectarianism, form a broad united front and curb adventurism." Two years later, after the first formal announcement of Kuomintang-Communist cooperation, he said, "... the main danger ... is no longer ... closed-door sectarianism but ... capitulationism." In the first instance the fire was aimed at obstacles to creating the united front, but once the united front came into being there was a new target: the danger of impermissible compromises that surrendered autonomy. Still later, in 1939-1940, when severe strains in the united front produced anticipations of its imminent rupture, Mao again shifted emphasis, "The main danger in the party at present is the mischief done by a 'Left' stand." Throughout, however, autonomy was retained, independent power was consciously reinforced, "a policy which integrates alliance and struggle" was followed.

When the united front was finally ruptured in 1946 the consequences were the exact opposite of what they had been in 1927. Instead of Chiang slaughtering the Communists, the Communists drove him from the mainland.

Even so brief a sketch of this political virtuosity, this superb blend of principled positions and tactical flexibility, shows how sterile are general admonitions against coalition, or against compromises, either with liberals or even corrupt reactionaries (you would have to look hard to find greater corruption and reaction than that of Chiang and his clique).

A similar observation is prompted by Cuba. In their fascination with guerrilla warfare many radicals totally ignore the revolution's politics. Not only was the original political platform of the July 26th Movement relatively restrained, but some five months before the revolution's military triumph the July 26th Movement signed a formal political agreement with nine other groups, which ranged from traditionally liberal to mildly radical. Both the participants and program of this coalition were of a People's Front character. Indeed, the single most conspicuous distinction from other People's Fronts was exclusion of the Communists.



No momentary aberration, this broad coalition policy stamped the provisional government installed after Batista fled and the rebel army commanded effective power in the country. The provisional President was Manuel Urrutia, a moderate judge who was distinguishable from other judges by his retention of judicial integrity during the Batista regime. The Prime Minister, José Miro Cardona, was Cuba's most successful criminal lawyer and president of the Havana Bar Association, professional distinctions that were hardly revolutionary. In its make-up the regime dramatized Castro's politics of the united front embracing all who had opposed Batista's tyranny. (Once again exclusion of Communists was conspicuous.) This regime was short-lived; as the revolution advanced, class and political differentiations emerged in the anti-Batista front, and corresponding alterations were made in the make-up of the government. But the all-inclusive nature of the anti-Batista front initially and its reflection in the first revolutionary government were salient features defining a distinct phase of the Cuban revolution.

I know the United States is not China or Cuba. I know the Chinese and Cuban revolutionaries waged armed struggle, carved out base areas, established what was, in effect, a dual power. I know that guerrilla warfare helped shape the political character, the ethics and relationships of the armed revolutionaries. But they represented only a minuscule fraction of the population. Beyond them were vast millions, who did not take up arms, but whose active support, or sympathetic neutrality at the very least, was decisive. To influence and activate those millions there was a politics that in its immediate, unifying objective — overthrow of the Batista tyranny or defeat of Japanese aggression — may be termed the politics of the lowest common denominator.

Yes, the United States is different, but for a serious Left the difference makes even more mandatory a politics that activates and unites millions. As has often been noted in radical literature, in the industrially advanced capitalist democracies ideological hegemony or persuasion is, for the present, more impor-

tant than coercion in maintaining the authority of the existing regime. One may deplore manipulation, illusion, deception, but just the same millions participate, or think they participate in the political process. Here, consequently, the battle to change the consciousness of millions assumes even greater importance than in countries where coercion eclipses any pretense that government rests upon the freely given consent of the governed.

Changing the consciousness of millions requires a politics that *is*, rather than ought to be, relevant to them. It requires a politics that overcomes apathy and a sense of helplessness, that stimulates a self-realization that what people think is important and what they do can be effective. In a sense it requires the creation of an environment in which issues, events, conflicts are conducive to ideological mobility. Such an environment is created by objective circumstances (the economic crisis of the 1930s or the Vietnam war of the 1960s) and specific responses to these circumstances (the radical initiatives in the two decades). A distinction may be usefully drawn between the creation of the environment and Left behavior in it. The Left's ability to determine its own behavior is qualitatively different from its ability to shape the environment, which is decisively influenced by factors beyond its control. But the usefulness of the distinction goes beyond this basic fact. In the 1930s, for example, the Left indisputably contributed to creating an environment in which it could influence the minds of millions; controversy centers on what it did in the milieu it helped to make. Once a Left that numbers in the thousands aspires to a politics that is relevant to millions, and without this it is idle to talk of an environment for substantial ideological transformation, it inevitably confronts problems of alliance with those outside its ranks, and intermediate objectives that are the basis for alliance.

In such a confrontation, after making all the allowances for different circumstances, the Chinese and Cuban experiences may be useful. Although specific answers will differ, some of the essential questions are the same. These concern independence within an alliance, the freedom for the contest of ideas,

retention and projection of a Left perspective that goes beyond the common objectives of the alliance, the exertion of ideological influence, and reinforcement of the Left. In considering these matters it is illuminating to relate their treatment abroad to what occurred in the United States in the 1930s.

Significantly, Chinese Communist assessment of their own history does not regard the united front with the Kuomintang in 1924-1927 as a mistake despite its catastrophic finale. On the contrary they refer to the period as the "First Great Revolution." What they do regard as a tragic mistake is that toward the end of that period their policy, as Mao put it, "was one of all alliance and no struggle."

I find this thought very helpful in assessing alliances made by the American Left in the 1930s, and most particularly the "Left-Center bloc" in the CIO, which was perhaps the most significant of all. Because the Left was an important factor in the CIO, this alliance, directly or indirectly, affected millions of workers in that era and the present-day American labor movement bears the residual traces.

An episode at the 1939 United Auto Workers convention may serve as an introduction to the complications of this united front. A delegation of national Communist leaders, headed by Earl Browder, descended on that convention to persuade Communist delegates to support R. J. Thomas, an incompetent opportunist, for the union presidency against George Addes, a militant who was associated with the Left in internal union politics.

This episode was once cited as a horrible example of "Old Left" opportunism by Staughton Lynd, historian and radical activist who believes "it is desperately important" for the "New Left" to "come to grips" with the experience of the 1930s. But his own grip of this episode was not quite firm. He posed the question: Why did the Communist leaders do that? "The argument of the Left," Lynd replied, "was always labor unity." He went on with a long list of invidious questions: why did the Left do this and that? After each question came the refrain, "Because of labor unity."

Placed in this way "labor unity" has little relation to reality.

There was no labor unity. Two rival labor federations existed, the more militant CIO and the conservative AFL. True, as a general desideratum Communists advanced the slogan of "labor unity," but in the everyday conflict between the two federations they unequivocally supported the CIO. The general slogan of "labor unity" had nothing to do with the tactic in the auto union that insured election of Thomas. At stake was the Left-Center bloc. In this formula the Center was personified by such CIO leaders as Sidney Hillman of the Clothing Workers and Philip Murray of the Steelworkers. Thomas was the Hillman-Murray choice and the national Communist leaders acquiesced to it to safeguard the alliance. To learn anything from this incident it is no help to talk of "labor unity" in the abstract; it is necessary to examine a particular relationship, its origin, rationale, evolution, and consequences.

Loose and informal, the Left-Center bloc originated in a common endeavor to organize millions of workers in the country's basic industries in industrial unions. Was this a valid Left objective? Undoubtedly. And in the circumstances it could be achieved only by Left-Center cooperation. The Left could not do it alone, nor could the Center. A mutual recognition of this fact and a common commitment to getting the job done created the bloc. And, in the main, the alliance achieved its initial objective.

It is difficult to convey to young radicals, who only know the present-day labor movement and even this superficially, what organization of the unorganized meant to the Left of the 1930s. It meant creation of an elementary sense of power among the workers, manifested tangibly at first in their capacity, through united action and halting the productive process, to win some voice in setting the terms of their employment and labor. After generations in which unilateral settlement of these terms was regarded by the employers as an exclusive management prerogative, such a change represented a startling awareness and exercise of workers' power.

Unionization meant, in the historical evolution of the working class, the first great leap in consciousness, from unbridled competition among the workers to cooperation and solidarity. }

It also provided more favorable conditions for expanding consciousness. When corporate despotism governed in the workplace it also embraced the culture and politics of the industrial communities. Free speech was a utopian notion. Any manifestation of radicalism or any other challenge to corporate domination was ruthlessly suppressed. In the classical remark by the mayor of Duquesne, even Jesus Christ could not speak for unions in that Western Pennsylvania steel town. Once union power curbed economic terrorism in industry workers also won a measure of democracy in the community, a degree of freedom to express and disseminate hitherto forbidden ideas.

Corporate resistance magnified the issue in the battle for unionization. According to the La Follette Senate Committee, employers were spending \$80 million per year for spies, private armies and arsenals, and other devices to thwart unionism. Private instruments of violence were augmented by public means. Use of police and troops, state and federal, to break strikes and crush unions was a commonplace of American industrial history. For the Left capitalist behavior was irrefutable confirmation of the value it placed on union organization in the vital sectors of the American economy. Even without the social vision of the Left, John L. Lewis and others of the CIO Center couched their appeals in radical and militant terms, for they understood that a moderate summons could not arouse millions of workers from submission into battle against the odds they faced, to brave violence, hunger, and the loss of their livelihood if they did not prevail.

Did the adversaries in those industrial battles, frequently bitter and occasionally bloody, totally misjudge the issue between them? Was it all a response to a false alarm, the upheaval and conflict that swept industrial America? I think not. An end to corporate absolutism in relation to the workers and the formation of unions to shield and advance the economic interests of the workers — these, in themselves, were stakes sufficient for the magnitude and intensity of the conflict. But the march of the CIO also signaled the emergence of the working class as a vital, organized power on the American scene, not yet autonomous and not conscious of distinct class character and

purpose, although the potential of such consciousness seemed near the surface. This potential inspired Left hopes and corporate fears, serving to sharpen the conflict.

Its own vision contributed to the idealism, energy, and devotion with which the Left threw itself into the CIO organizing drives. It may have been too sanguine in its expectations. Browder, for example, said, "The CIO marks the emerging of a conscious working class in American life." This larger vision did not materialize. Nonetheless the CIO's success remains the biggest single advance yet made by the American working class, a peak of creative initiative and militant solidarity, and a durable achievement.

If it had not been done then, the organization of the millions in the basic trustified industries would still be at the top of any serious radical agenda (without the benefit of hindsight), as it was for preceding generations of radicals. And if the Left today can focus much attention on problems of consciousness, on political and social issues transcending narrow economic interest, this is largely because the primary economic organizations of the workers were fashioned a generation ago and still provide the framework for dealing with immediate economic needs. (This, however, does not justify supercilious attitudes that have cropped up in some "New Left" quarters toward the workers' economic concerns or the assumption that economic issues have lost their potency as a source of class confrontation. I feel uneasy about theoretical profundities that boil down to something that was stated long ago much more lucidly and succinctly in the bromide, "Money can't buy happiness!")

Any new advance of the American working class, whatever forms it takes and however it reflects the changed composition of the laboring force, will proceed from plateaus attained by the CIO. Without understanding what the CIO meant in its time it is not possible to understand the commitment of the Left to the bloc with the Center or the internal evolution of the alliance.

A portent of things to come was revealed in June 1937 during the CIO's best days. Some Michigan Communists had criticized a Chrysler strike settlement by auto union leaders. They

were severely rebuked by Browder in a report to the Communist Central Committee. There were no "intolerable compromises" in the settlement, he said, "there was merely a secondary problem of the impatience of certain leaders in dealing with the rank and file."

"But," he went on, "even if their fears had more solid foundations, it was necessary to proceed with much more tact, foresight, and consideration . . ." Consideration of what? He made this clear: "We are a fully responsible party, and our subdivisions and fractions do not independently take actions which threaten to change our whole national relationship with a great and growing mass movement . . . We do not attempt to estimate such difficult and complicated trade union problems [as the Chrysler settlement] by ourselves . . . but only on the basis of . . . discussion with our comrades-in-arms of the general trade union activities . . ."

Two points in the message were implicit. Even if a contract was bad the Left should refrain from criticism if the criticism threatened to disturb the Left-Center bloc at the top. And the Left should estimate such agreements, not independently, but only in consultation (and, implicitly, agreement) with the Center.

Here a Chinese treatment of a variation of this position is pertinent. In roughly the same period one Communist leader advanced the slogan, "Everything through the united front." Both Liu Shao-chi (subsequently the number-one scapegoat in the Cultural Revolution of the mid-1960s) and Mao said that in practice this meant securing prior agreement of Chiang Kai-shek before doing anything. "As the policy of the Kuomintang is to restrict our development," Mao said, "there is no reason whatever for us to put forward such a slogan, which merely binds us hand and foot."

Very definitely the policy of Hillman and Murray, like the Kuomintang's, was to restrict the development of the Left. And "everything through the united front" within the CIO also had the effect of binding the Left hand and foot. The injunction to the Left after the Chrysler settlement controversy contained strong elements of "everything through the united front." Just

as the Left-supported election of R. J. Thomas to the auto union presidency entailed some hand-and-foot binding.

The Thomas choice was also revealing in its methodology. From the testimony of Wyndham Mortimer, who was intimately associated with the Communists as a founder and early militant leader of the auto union, it is clear the Communist decision was made at the top after consultation with the Hillman-Murray combination. But there was no prior consultation with the Communist auto workers, who were most intimately acquainted with conditions in the union and the industry. They did not participate in making the decision although the burden for implementing it would be theirs, they would have to live with its direct consequences and would be held accountable for them by their fellow workers. The governing consideration was the Left-Center bloc at the top, or more specifically the relationship with Hillman and Murray, and this same consideration inevitably produced the same methodology in other situations. The bureaucratic method was poorly designed to cultivate Left independence or build Left strength in the respective unions.

From Chrysler and Thomas it was no great leap to Left self-abnegation at the 1940 CIO convention where Communists and their close associates voted for a resolution that declared: "We neither accept or desire — and we firmly reject consideration of any policies emanating from totalitarianism, dictatorships, and foreign ideologies such as nazism, communism, and fascism. They have no place in this great modern labor movement. The Congress of Industrial Organizations condemns the dictatorships and totalitarianism of nazism, communism, and fascism as inimical to the welfare of labor, and destructive of our form of government."

To accentuate the humiliating irony Lee Pressman, a lawyer whose Communist affiliation was an open secret, had to perform the formal chore, as secretary of the convention's resolutions committee, of moving adoption of this anti-Communist declaration.

Having swallowed that bucket of castor oil in 1940 the Left could not very well gag at a pill in the 1946 CIO convention.



Here the Left (including Communists) participated in drafting a unanimously adopted resolution that said: "We resent and reject efforts of the Communist party or other political parties and their adherents to interfere in the affairs of the CIO. This convention serves notice that we will not tolerate such interference." (The reference to "other political parties" was demagoguery. The convention stage swarmed with Democratic party dignitaries wearing the mantle of government office, and the intervention of the Roosevelt and Truman Democratic administrations in CIO affairs was notorious.)

When the Left-Center rupture finally came in 1947 and Murray turned on his erstwhile allies to flay and slay them, it was, if a Chinese parallel may be invoked again, 1927 for the Left and not 1946. The Left was decimated and depleted. It did not even have the will to regroup. For the next quarter of a century (up to this writing) the Left in labor was a scattering of tiny fragments, isolated islands. Not since the formation of the AFL in the 1880s was there ever so long a period when the Left was so impotent in the American labor movement.

At each point of the CIO story there was, of course, a credible tactical argument, hinged on preservation of the Left-Center bloc, for the position taken. Viewing it all in historical perspective, however, it is difficult not to conclude that in their sum those positions represented a rape of principle by tactic. And in the end what profit was there in the shrewdness of the tactic? The question concerns more than narrow self-interest. Patently surrender of independent positions and compromises of principle eroded Left strength and moral authority, but did not these concessions also vitiate the character of the CIO as a militant, progressive movement? The more the Left conceded, it might be said, the less it contributed to the CIO and the less it got for itself. True, it retained nominal leadership in several unions that claimed a total of 900,000 members, but fundamentally it was weaker at the termination of the alliance than it was at the beginning.

I am intrigued by a coincidence. At just about the time that the Left engaged in self-flagellation at the 1940 CIO convention the Chinese produced this previously cited formula: "Inso-

far as they [Kuomintang leaders] are still unwilling to bring about a final breakup of the Kuomintang-Communist cooperation, we adopt a policy of uniting with them and, insofar as they pursue a highhanded policy and make military offensives against our party and the people, we adopt a policy of struggling against them." As intriguing as the coincidence is the question it suggests: was it feasible to devise an effective American variant of this delicate duality, this flexible combination of alliance and struggle, in the CIO Left-Center relationship?

It is a tragedy of the American Left that the CIO experience has fallen between two stools. The "Old Left" (with some exceptions), prone to nostalgic revels in the glories of the CIO's heyday and understandably bent on insuring the historical credits that are its due, has not come to grips, critically or analytically, with its experience. And the "New Left," for the most part, has been too obsessed with negative aspects of the experience to confront it with critical objectivity. Scattered efforts made by the "New Left" have not avoided the pitfall of hindsight, which may be described as a failure of historical empathy, an inability to apprehend people and events in their historical context with its particular imperatives.

A generic condemnation of the Left for entering into a bloc with the CIO Center, it seems to me, misses the whole point; it substitutes the illusion of an easy solution (abstention from such a bloc) for the reality of a difficult problem (how to behave in such a bloc). Historically, I believe, the bloc, especially in 1936-1939, was as valid, in American terms, as the Communist-Kuomintang alliance in 1924-1927. And if the latter has been called the First Great Revolution, the former may be more modestly called the First Great Upsurge. The fatal flaw of Left policy, as I see it, was that it became "all alliance and no struggle."

Like any generalization this one only approximates the truth. Given the contradictions between the Left and Center, conflicts arose. The generalization is valid only to the extent that conflicts were inconsistent and at the top were subsumed by the alliance. Thus, it is not altogether true to say as Staughton Lynd said: "The Left sought to salve its ideological conscience

by passing resolutions. Little was done about these resolutions, but 'one took a position!' and that was felt to be significant." This picture does not encompass the long, intense, wearying battles in countless local unions and councils throughout the country. Many of these battles related to both action and a more heightened consciousness among the workers.

Certainly this was true in battles against racist prejudices and barriers. The National Maritime Union was an example, a very striking example because racist prejudice exploited the uniqueness of the seafaring crafts in which men not only worked together but lived together. Drawing on personal experience I encountered the racist argument, "On a shoreside job I wouldn't mind working with them, but on a ship you got to sleep and eat with them." To think that a breakthrough against such prejudice was achieved without the most intense struggle is un-American fantasy. And to belittle this breakthrough and others in their time is to misconstrue totally the presence and effects of racism in American life. One cannot come to grips with this experience by patronizing references to ideological conscience-salving.

(I might interject here that, in general, Left exploration of what then was called "the Negro question" represented the most important single contribution to American radical theory yet made. The perception of the national character of the black liberation struggle was a great leap from prior radical approaches, which were crudely racist at worst, and at best humanist or marked by the simplistic class analysis that the condition of blacks was just part of the overall working-class condition. True, black nationalist leaders had overtly expressed aspirations of black people as a people, but being nationalists they did not relate black liberation to any total conception of Socialist revolution. On this last score the Left of the 1930s pioneered; recognizing the autonomy of the black liberation struggle, it simultaneously comprehended the struggle as a dynamic, integral element in any general strategy of Socialist revolution. Despite rigidity and errors this Left initiative blazed a new trail for radical theory and set new standards for radical practice.)

A common complaint against the Left was that it constantly injected “extraneous” political issues into union affairs, such issues as the war in Spain, the Japanese aggression against China and the Italian aggression against Ethiopia, and more generally the issues of war and fascism. The frequency and irritability of the complaints suggest that to argue for union concern with such issues, and not only with “porkchops,” was already to fight for a higher level of consciousness than was prevalent at the time. By joining these issues the Left was not salving its conscience, it was articulating its true consciousness. And these thousands of small deeds ought to be taken into account along with such big phenomena as the mortification at the 1940 CIO convention. The valid overall generalization of “all alliance and no struggle” was modified by contradiction in actual life.

Contradiction also beset such Left efforts as were made to project a Socialist alternative. These were handicapped by the rigid contours of the Left’s own vision. Typically, a 1936 national Communist convention resolution contained these formulations: “for a socialist revolution and Soviet power — the only road to socialism” and “for a Soviet America.” This position can only be understood in the context of its time. Initially in the revolution and later on in the contrast with the cataclysmic economic crisis in the capitalist world the Soviet example possessed an enormous power of attraction. Moreover, the substance of Soviet power, as distinct from the particular form that gave it its name, contained features (e.g., dual power) that are indispensable to revolution. Millions throughout the world were, in fact, won for a Socialist vision under that slogan. Just the same the insistence that the only existing model of Socialism is also the only possible model was theoretically wrong and tactically alienating. The enormous damage done by the model fixation defies precise measure.

After 1936 the “for a Soviet America” slogan was dropped. It vanished without a trace of thoughtful theoretical explanation. Nor was there a theoretical elaboration of an alternative at the time. What existed was a vacuum — or the lively ghost of the old slogan. The resultant ambiguity impaired the communica-

tion of a Socialist vision. And for those who had it the relevancy of it was obscured, for the ambiguity obstructed a systematic, consistent exposition of the relationship between the earnest pursuit of immediate objectives and an ultimate destination. The transition became nebulous. Undoubtedly this state of affairs intensified the powerful and ever-present pressures for total immersion in the issues of the moment with the Socialist vision relegated to the back of the mind or the tail of an omnibus resolution.

A theoretical gap existed, and coupled with the tactical accommodations exemplified in the CIO Left-Center bloc, it contributed to an inability to create a larger, more durable and viable Socialist constituency. The relative weight of these lapses is incalculable among all the other factors that were heaped on the scales, including the momentous events that soon followed: World War II, the postwar economic boom, the cold war, McCarthyism. To consider just one of these, the effects of the war upon internal politics in the United States and on the European continent were diametrically opposite. In continental Europe the governing classes led their respective nations to the disaster of defeat and subjugation by the Nazis. The Left inspired and led the resistance to the Nazis and their collaborators. In the United States the governing class was in command during the war and people of the Left were loyal troops in the ranks. To accentuate this relationship the Left, in the name of its valid commitment to defeat of the Nazis, was subordinated so completely to the Commander-in-Chief, President Roosevelt, that its independent identity was increasingly smothered. Indeed, the reason for its existence as a political entity was compromised. The extent to which these things occurred was symbolized by the dissolution of the Communist Party, still the hegemonic influence in the American Left.

Opposite circumstances, opposite consequences. In several European countries the Left emerged from the war as a major or dominant force; in the United States it was compromised and weakened in its most important constituencies, the working class and the black community, and beset by an internal crisis.

Origins of Left wartime policy can be traced, of course, in

the prewar trends. I have chosen to concentrate on the Left-Center bloc in the CIO because it was the most tangible and vital in the complex of united front relationships. I believe, for example, that subordination of the Left to the Center within the bloc exerted a major, probably a decisive, influence on the Left attitude toward the Roosevelt administration. But any serious treatment of that relationship, culminating in Left dependency upon Roosevelt, would require a separate examination.

In the CIO bloc the validity and the perils of a united front were strikingly illuminated. Because I believe that comprehension of the united front is indispensable in the search for a transition to Socialist revolution, I think the experience warrants thoughtful study. The important point is not to arrive at retroactive judgments of what the Left should have done. The point is to arrive at a better understanding of what needs to be done now. As the contemporary Left attempts to engage in a politics of the millions, it will encounter opportunities and difficulties comparable to those of the 1930s. If this is true, what was and was not done then has relevance.