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Reagan: is it as bad as it sounds ?

Reagan's inauguration threatens to mark the beginning of a new era in American politics.¹ The nationally televised ceremonies, with accompanying celebrations for prominent supporters throughout the country (even in Yuma, Arizona) make the eerie cultural dimension of the promised new period loom large. It is easy enough to laugh at the absurdity of the long march to power of this mediocre actor, ex-president of an anti-union union. Such laughter provides small consolation, however.

A starting point for assessing Reagan's victory is to recognise that while it was no accident, its durability is questionable. In the analysis which follows, I will explore the sources of that victory, sketch the present balance of political forces in the US, and indicate the main problems faced by the American Left. Where appropriate, I will suggest comparisons with the recent British experience, but without implying more than parallel development in certain areas.

THE 1980 ELECTION — MOVING RIGHT

The 1980 elections marked a significant turn to the right in American politics. It is worth emphasising this point, as it is so tempting for the Left — including the socialist Left — to refuse it by claiming that the vote for Reagan was not really a vote *for* Reagan, but a vote against Carter, against statist liberalism, against economic stagnation. All these rejections did occur — yet the direction taken, at a mass level, *was* to the right, toward an articulation of popular and democratic themes to the specific projects of the Right.

This dynamic can easily be missed if one imagines that a move to the right would look like an explicit popular adoption of the views the Left imagines particularly nasty rightist leaders to hold. Moving to the right, especially after the 1960s, does not mean that masses of people begin to sound like Senator Jesse Helms, or Anita Bryant, or the leaders of the Moral Majority.² There is no problem in finding directly racist or sexist statements, even by prominent public figures. Such statements are infuriating, grotesque, and yet ultimately not so important as more subtle processes of ideological reconstruction. The themes of productivity, self-reliance, family, community, and national security and power, provide raw material in popular discussion of political choices. The Right's projects link these themes to programmatic and ideological choices whose *effects* are anti-union, or anti-feminist. Even within the polemics of the far Right, such effects are not presented as the goal. That goal, restated constantly, is claimed to be the restoration and development of American power. This means not just international strength, but unproblematic

economic growth, and social and political stability. Quite a lot to promise.

Reagan's victory was only in part a result of the moment, of Carter's incompetence. It is better understood in the context of several longer term patterns of political change. One is the persistent efforts of the far Right, following the Goldwater debacle in 1964, to regroup, expand their forces, and make alliances in pursuing a long term strategy aimed at national power. Another is the movement of centre-left parts of the Republican Party to the right over the last fifteen years. A third (and in certain respects the most important) has been the break-up of the Democratic coalition which in 1964 overwhelmingly elected Lyndon Johnson against the threat of the Republican Right. Between 1964 and 1968, the Democratic coalition suffered two major defections. On its right, a large number of lower middle class and working class white people moved toward the mixture of anti-statist, quasi-populist, and racist politics of George Wallace. On the left, large sections of the new and old middle classes, many young people, significant numbers of black people, and a smaller section of the industrial working class were drawn to the positions of Robert Kennedy — others moved further to the left, and many became committed non-voters.

Since 1964, the Democratic Party has been able to win the presidency only once in four elections. That election, in 1976, saw the Republicans saddled with the legacy of Vietnam and of Watergate, as well as with a notably mediocre political leader in the incumbent, Gerald Ford. Reagan's victory is not shocking, and does not depart dramatically from recent history, despite its substantial margin.

Can the rightward shift be made durable?

Can this rightward shift now be considered to have been consolidated into a durable form? Despite the scope of the shift, such a judgment would be premature. There *is* evidence for it — in a sense, with Carter, Anderson, and Reagan there were *three* Republicans running for the presidency.³ And Reagan's victory was accompanied by the dramatic defeat of a number of liberal Senators, such as George McGovern of South Dakota, Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, and Birch Bayh of Indiana,⁴ whose rejection had a definite ideological meaning.

Yet on the state and local level the results were often more mixed. Liberals and left-liberals were not all expelled from offices. In many cases, liberals who lost still did much better than Carter. And while anger at Carter should not be read as completely malleable, it is certainly true that Reagan received many votes from people who were concerned mainly to dispose of Carter. (This is the sense in which

Reagan 'won' last autumn's presidential debate. By appearing on television with Carter, not making any horrible blunders, showing some understanding that nuclear war would be unfortunate, demonstrating that his personal impulses are not purely spiteful and narrow, he was able to reassure large numbers of anti-Carter voters that voting for him was not a wildly irresponsible act.)

Reagan and the Republicans failed to change perhaps the single most dramatic feature of the current political scene. Massive non-voting has now reached the point that only in presidential elections do more than 50% of eligible voters bother to vote. In 1980, only 52% of eligible voters turned out, meaning that Reagan's landslide victory was based on only about 26% of the electorate. This inability to persuade non-voters to participate reveals the present limits of Reagan Republicanism as a force capable of producing a durable political realignment. Yet while noting this limit, it is crucial not to allow oneself the illusion that non-voters are a sort of reserve army of the (potential) Left, awaiting the proper appeal. Despite the fact that non-voters come disproportionately from among young people, the very poor, and racial and ethnic minorities, neither their views nor their activities outside politics now demonstrate an outlook dramatically different from those now represented on the political scene. Because of the depth of the decomposition of both the political system and elements of the class and social structure, non-voters cannot be assumed to have 'natural' political inclinations. A key index of durable political change would be a major increase in political participation, beginning with voting. That Reagan did not accomplish this does not mean that only the Left can do so.

WHO IS REAGAN, WHAT IS REAGANISM?

What is the nature of the new governing coalition? At the electoral level, the Reagan victory received strikingly heterogeneous, multiclass support. Only blacks — and to a lesser extent Hispanics — overwhelmingly rejected him. According to early polling data following the election, Reagan won 46% of the vote from households with a union member, as opposed to Carter's 47% — a dramatic sign of the erosion of the Democratic coalition.⁵

Welding this multiclass support into a new coalition is no easy matter, however, especially given the diverse and often antagonistic character of the groups within the new coalition. The dream of a popular 'populist' conservatism has been a driving force within the American Right for quite some time, and was argued extensively by various Right analysts after Nixon's first victory. Whether it is now attainable depends in large measure upon whether it is possible to produce a coherent new political force out of the many currents represented at the top.

For now, the predominant force in the new administration certainly seems to be traditional conservative Republicanism, which moved even further to the right in the 1970s, but still remains tied to the dominant postwar liberal consensus. These people have gained the main cabinet posts dispensed by the new administration, provide a core of policy advisors, and seem likely to guide both the course of national economic policy and strategic relations with the Soviet Union and China. Their perspective is unambiguously stamped by the interests of the largest corporate groups, tinged very little by the semi-populist themes of the Reagan campaign.

In fact, the current predominance probably signals sharp conflicts within and around the new administration. In the figure, of Alexander Haig, as the nominee for Secretary of State, as direct a representative of the Ford/Kissinger perspective as could be imagined would be at the centre of the new government. If this pattern is retained through the early policy choices, at least two other currents important to Reagan's success are apt to enter increasingly loud objections. One of

these is the traditional conservative far Right, now respectably represented by William F Buckley's *National Review* — a thoroughly elitist conservatism more critical of the fundamentals of Keynesianism and the (semi-) welfare state than a Ford or Kissinger, or a Caspar Weinberger.⁶ The other is the widely publicised new Right, composed on the one hand of semi-populist economic interest groups demanding lower taxes, de-regulation, and decreased state intervention generally (Congressman Jack Kemp);⁷ and on the other hand of groups fighting on 'social' issues (the 'Moral Majority'), to restrict or eliminate abortion rights, to return religious instruction to public schools, and to stop busing for purposes of racial integration, among other goals.

It is no easy matter to pull together this chaotic assortment of groups, much less exercise discipline over the resulting coalition. For now, at least, there is no unified Right to which Reagan gives marching orders, no strategic Centre that multiplies its initiatives in a concerted fashion. Instead, in a manner typical of American politics, there is a proliferation of overlapping and allied interest groups, giving their best on the issues of most immediate concern to them.

The key areas of Reagan's appeal

There are themes around which the Reagan campaign was waged that might provide the basis for a durable coalition, perhaps even a realignment. One such issue was anti-statism, opposition to 'big government's' stifling of initiative. Another was growth — a critique of Democratic economic policy not at all in the name of a necessary but difficult austerity, but in the name of limitless growth, renewed unproblematic prosperity. (In this regard, the Reagan campaign promises certainly diverge from Thatcherism in power, though perhaps a similar evolution may occur if economic problems prove intractable, and various emergency measures — perhaps even including wage-price controls — are introduced.) Undoubtedly, the accumulating economic problems of the last few years, notably unemployment and rising oil prices, contributed significantly to Reagan's success.

A third area of Reagan's concern centred on the family and the 'social' — reaffirming what are imagined to be stable traditional relations between women and men, parents and children, against the chaos of modernist, liberal, anti-communal, and hyper-individualist forces.

Finally, Reagan promised to renew global American power. He would spare the country the humiliation of the Iranian situation, or of having actually to negotiate with tiny nations like Panama as though they were actual countries.

Many promises were made, many very difficult to keep — and

¹ This article draws on material presented at much greater length in a two pan article 'The US in Transition' in *Socialist Review*, Nos 54 and 55.

² Jesse Helms is a prominent right wing Republican Senator. Anita Bryant, a former pop singer, is a well known right wing figure who has campaigned actively against gay rights. The Moral Majority is how the right religious forces describe their support, (*ed*).

³ Whatever the label, all three, for example, ran on relatively right-wing economic platforms, (*ed*).

⁴ All three are Democratic Senators associated with 'liberal' causes. Most notably, former Senator McGovern fought on a relatively radical platform against Nixon in the 1972 presidential election, (*ed*).

⁵ The Democratic coalition, which originally dates back to Roosevelt's election victory of 1936, embraced at its outset the South, organised labour, blacks, and some other ethnic minorities, (*ed*).

⁶ Caspar Weinberger has been appointed as Secretary of Defence in Reagan's new cabinet, (*ed*).

⁷ Jack Kemp is a Republican Congressman who jointly sponsored the Kemp-Roth amendment to reduce the general rate of income tax which was subsequently championed by Reagan, (*ed*).

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things have not gone so far that it will be unnoticed whether they are kept. One ought not assume clumsy failures in all areas, despite the depth of the problems that exist.

All the promises are attempted solutions to situations perceived as more or less serious, often even as catastrophic. In each case, there is a particularly American dimension to problems also experienced in most other Western countries. Anti-statism may seem puzzling, given the modest existing role of the state, yet combined with the demand for endless economic growth, it resonates deeply with a cultural and political heritage that cuts across most social divisions. An insistence on predominant international power is a late, confused, and dangerous response to the disappearance of the absolute American territorial security of most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most countries have never experienced this condition, but it was real enough for the US, and its absence in the nuclear period — a real absence, a real shift — is received as an insulting shock among wide sections of the population.

Can these themes be woven together coherently? Can the diverse political fractions within and around the Republican Party be shaped into a dynamic leading force? The domination of traditional conservative Republicanism would make this unlikely, yet provide a certain secure direction for a Reagan administration. The result would most likely not be a major lasting realignment, but a quite significant shift to the right of the terms of political discourse. The other constituents of the new coalition must seem erratic, dangerous, and unpredictable to many within the new administration, despite their crucial role in mobilising popular support for Reagan.

THE FATE OF THE DEMOCRATS

It is easier to be clear about the decline of the Democrats. The 1980 elections tore across the traditional Democratic coalition, across classes, regions, and even minority groups whose votes once could be assumed to be overwhelmingly Democratic.

The search for someone to blame is ongoing. It is easy to find a prime candidate in Jimmy Carter. Like liberal and social democratic governments forced out of office in the last few years in other Western countries, Carter adopted Republican economic policies without the ruthless consistency necessary to gain Republican support, but with enough vigour to demobilise and disorient traditional Democratic constituencies within the working class and lower middle classes. He maintained a liberal posture on many social and political issues to a sufficient extent to alienate traditional conservatives and the new Right, but without enough intensity and seriousness to sustain the adherence of new progressive social movements, such as the women's movement. (Even so, women were much likelier than men to vote for Carter, and the 1980 election saw new divergences between the voting of women and men).

Many analysts have argued that any president would have been

devoured by the problems Carter met, and that a similar fate awaits Reagan. This line of argument rightly notes the depth of structural problems, especially economic problems. But it allows too little space for the role of political creativity (even shrewd opportunism) in redefining and mastering 'problems'. Carter's incompetence, then, bears the stamp of his own political and personal formation as well as that of the obstacles to any successful policy by the national government.

Yet the Democrats are hardly able to claim that Carter was/is the only problem, given the debacle in Congress, with a new Republican Senate and a House of Representatives dominated by conservative Democrats aligned with centre-right Republicans. Another election registering a similar shift would be devastating in a permanent way for the Democratic Party. Even a mid-term election in 1982 that did not see a swing back toward the Democrats would be a major blow.

The election results revealed the internal decay not only of the Democratic Party, but of the mass organisations allied with it. The party, after years of internal 'reform', found itself unable to conduct major mobilisations for either its presidential candidate, or, with some exceptions, even for the threatened Senators, who were named by the new Right as prime targets for defeat, and then defeated. As well, neither the trade unions nor the remaining major black organisations proved capable of mobilising activist campaigns, nor, in the case of the former, even of delivering a decisive majority from their voting members.

The organisational weakness of the Democratic Party — deepened by the spread of media-based political strategies — appears at almost every level. There is financial weakness, compared to the Republicans; a lesser capacity for popular mobilisation, compared with the Democrats' own past; and a pronounced lack of programmatic and ideological vision. Yet despite this weakness, the party is not on the verge of disappearing, nor is it about to be deserted by any of the main organised expressions of its prime constituencies. Its future definition is already the focus of intense discussion and conflict.

The debate in the Democratic Party

After such a defeat, there has been considerable debate over what happened. This debate has tended to sharpen existing divisions within the party, and opens the way for a period of intense and important factional struggle.

There are now a number of distinct tendencies within the Democratic Party. On its right, several groupings argue that the defeat resulted from the failure of the party to be more critical of social liberal welfare policies and to advocate a growing military expenditure. This Right is represented by a number of Southern Democrats, as well as 'neo-conservative' liberals such as Senator Daniel Moynihan of New York. At the centre, substantial forces remain committed to a domestic policy similar to Carter's, trying to reconcile a 'Republican' economic policy with a welfarist social policy in a period of stagflation. These forces will be represented, for example, by ex-Vice President Mondale. On the left, one tendency, represented by Senator Kennedy, argues essentially for a reconstructed New Deal programme of expanded state welfare expenditure, combined with a more critical attitude toward defence expenditure. Another tendency, rather more complex, combines a critique of Keynesian economic policy — in favour, variously, of a policy of 'creative austerity' in the face of an 'era of limits'; or a restructuring of economic growth patterns away from the postwar structure — with a more strongly positive assessment of the new social movements of the last two decades, particularly the environmental movement and the feminist movement. This tendency is represented in part (and confusingly) by Governor Brown of California.

Given this diversity, it is no easy matter for any faction to pull the party together. As so much is at stake, conflicts are apt to intensify beyond the initial declarations of war made by the Democratic right against left-liberals immediately after the election. Because of the electoral shift to the right, the forces of the left tendencies in the Democratic Party are now much weakened, such that only about a quarter of the 247 Democrats in the House of Representatives can now easily be identified as liberals or left-liberals in conventional terms.

Much depends on the political choices made by Kennedy and the forces around him. The incoherent, conflicted Kennedy campaign for the Democratic nomination wavered between two options, both of which still exist. One was to rely heavily on Kennedy's personal appeal (now questionable), and propose a politics only very slightly to the left of Carter's, assuming the support of the Left in the party and thereby reaching out far to the Right in order to reunify the party. The other was to move toward a sharper critique of Carter's policies from the left, attempting to mobilise a majority within the party for a reinvigorated New Deal social liberalism.

If Reagan's administration proves clumsy and incompetent, the first alternative may well seem irresistible as a quick means of getting rid of him. If Reagan retains and broadens his popular support, then the logic of the situation might lead toward an effort to fashion some version of the second stance.

By the end of the campaign for the Democratic nomination, Kennedy had become, rather than the left candidate, the sentimental candidate, whose efforts harking back to the progressive reformism of the 1930s and early 1960s drew tears and personal respect — but not political support. Kennedy's politically difficult stance now reflects the erosion of postwar Democratic liberalism.

RESTRUCTURING AND TRANSITION

The present moment is marked by a dramatic political fragmentation, the shattering of traditional positions and alignments, and diverse (often inchoate) efforts to form new ones. Why such fragmentation, and why now?

In the present period, the volatility of day-to-day politics is linked to a series of underlying processes of change. There is no simple way of summarising these processes. On one level, the US is amidst a decelerating and stagnant phase of an economic long wave — marked by peculiar features which emerged over the period of the long expansion after World War II. But this difficult economic moment is not just another downturn. It is intertwined with pressures toward deep social and economic restructuring. The portrayal of these processes in theories of 'post-industrial' society, for all the simplifications and omissions, captures crucial dimensions of what has been occurring: the decline of direct labour time in material production; the massive expansion of the service sector and the state; and the erosion of traditional connections among work, family, and community.

Not only is a vast economic and social restructuring taking place. As well, despite all the rhetoric of anti-statism in current political debates, tendencies intensify toward a significant expansion of state activity. At present, the US is quite unusual among advanced capitalist countries in this regard. The room for expanding the state, and thereby meeting diverse demands through that expansion, is very great.

In addition, long term processes of change in relations between women and men have accelerated in the last several decades, due to factors ranging from the demands of the economy to the specific dynamic of relations within the family. The result is to put in question traditional family forms, to pose the possibility of the dissolution of specifically patriarchal family forms — a possibility experienced in political debate in the last few years as a family and moral crisis.

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In sum, central economic, social, and political features of the US in the last eighty years (from the late nineteenth century) are on the verge of (and in some cases well into) far-reaching changes. These changes have their own rhythms, and intertwine in countless ways, but are irreducible one to the other.

Given these extensive changes, it is no surprise that the political alignments of the last forty years should splinter. It should be no surprise that the result is no automatic move to the left. New state forms, new models of accumulation and social structure, new relations between men and women could all take shape in more or less democratic and hierarchical forms, some quite brutal and unpleasant.

In the US today, confused immediate political manoeuvring combines with basic processes of transition to yield a sense of movement toward an uncertain future. This sense has very little in common with an acceptance of decline as unavoidable. Rather, within politics and culture, such decline as is acknowledged is portrayed as something to be surpassed. By the Right, the claims that it will be surpassed take on a patriotic and religious cast quite familiar in American history. Yet the issues are now distinctive and demand new solutions, new political alignments.

Two areas of continuity

Not everything is changing. Two crucial aspects of American society are not undergoing a basic transformation.

First, there is no sign of the disappearance of racial and ethnic stratification as absolutely central aspects of American society. To be sure, the patterns of stratification, particularly within the black population, have grown much more complex, as growing social and class differentiation have dispersed black social strata to widely varying fates. Yet race and ethnicity gain new meaning, given new waves of immigration from Latin America and Asia. In Reagan's campaign, overtly racist themes had nothing like the weight that they carried in the Wallace presidential bids, or even in Nixon's more allusive style. All the same, Reagan's victory bears the stamp of a reaction against the gains made especially by the black and Chicano

movements in the 1960s and early 1970s. Now the rhetoric of opposition centres on busing, and proclaims the need to defend equality of opportunity against (statist) affirmative action. In the electoral results, a sharp racial line was drawn, with over 80% of blacks voting for Carter.

Second, the debate over American power internationally, which in the recent election condensed as a debate over defence policy (and to a lesser extent, Iran) is not cast as a debate about how to manage a necessary decline. As positions were forged in the campaign, it was Carter (and even those Democrats to his left) who stressed the persistent scope and depth of American international power, while Reagan and the Right stressed themes of decline and decay. For the former position, of course, there is a greater recognition of real limits to the international role that the US (or any single country) can play. For Reagan — and this is one of the most dangerous aspects of the current scene — there is much less awareness of these obstacles. Reagan and his advisers have blamed the Soviet Union for all anti-Americanism — and even all conflict — in the contemporary world, yet at the same time insisted that a resolute American stance will rather quickly produce an end to this aggressive behaviour. It is easy to imagine this position's potential for dangerous confrontations, given the serious local and regional conflicts emerging in many areas of the world in which both the Soviet Union and the United States perceive their security interests to be at stake.

PROSPECTS

I have emphasised both the fluidity of the political scene, and the deeper volatility and openness of a number of ongoing processes of change in the US. Such a situation suggests tasks for the Left. In the medium

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term, the objective ought to be to influence the processes of transition now underway in as democratic and egalitarian a direction as possible.

In the short term, meaning the next several years, the most immediate task is to block the consolidation of the Reagan victory into a more durable realignment to the right. As I have indicated, this consolidation is far from having occurred, and a number of possibilities exist. Preventing it will require a good deal of rethinking of the guiding strategic conceptions of the Left, and a willingness to take risks.

The risks centre on the following problem. In a period of transition, when the gains of the leading progressive groups of the prior order are jeopardised, there is a very strong, almost 'natural' pressure toward a narrowly defensive and corporative response. This is all the more the case when, as in the contemporary US, there is now no question of an alternative that would basically transform the existing order. So, for example, the trade unions — already greatly weakened over the last several decades, now enrolling less than 25% of the paid labour force — are often, as in the automobile industry, faced with very bleak long term prospects. Yet given the mixed overall economic situation — decline and renewal for different regions and industries — the pressure is strong to accommodate to attacks, to make concessions to retain certain positions, in the hope of regaining others later on. Thus a relatively conservative response is likely to be appealing, to at least a part of the unions. This is especially the case as it is unlikely that the Reagan administration will declare a policy of pure and simple assault on the unions as a whole, rather than trying further to weaken and circumscribe them while holding the threat of a frontal assault in reserve.

As an alternative to this defensive stance, it is radically inadequate to

talk about 'fighting back' as though the problem were simply one of more militant resistance. The problem is programmatic, organisational, and at a certain point almost moral in terms of the decay of the internal life of the unions and other working class and popular organisations.

At the same time that older subordinate groups are under siege, the position of new social groups, and in particular new social movements, is made very difficult by the Right's offensive. For the women's movement, for example, it is necessary that every effort be expended to fight what have now become two great defensive battles: to prevent a humiliating defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment; and to stop efforts to restrict abortion rights.

Given that both new and old movements are forced into (different types of) defensive struggles, it becomes all the more difficult to realise the working forms of unity crucial to posing a general alternative to the project of the Right. There is no automatic logic, given the deeply rooted interest-group patterns of American politics, which leads towards a unification of diverse popular forces, forces with very different constituencies, histories, and political orientations.

The future of the Left

Nevertheless, at least the possibility of a mass Left does exist, one formed out of the wide array of new and old progressive movements and related political forces. Three crucial questions immediately confront any such effort:

—how to redefine a vision of democratic, public activity in the face of a strong critique of statism — without doing so, without posing a relatively open form of state and public activity as something really possible, it will be very hard to wage more than defensive sectional struggles;

—how to propose a model of non-patriarchal familial and social order, in a way that uncompromisingly defends the gains made by women's movement (and the gay movement), and refuses to cooperate in the Right's stigmatisation of these impulses as hyper-individualistic and anti-communal;

—how to enter and reshape the debate over 'reindustrialisation', over the reallocation and restructuring of investment, with its vast consequences both for immediate living and working conditions, and for new elements of class and social structure.

The mass Left which might be able to accomplish some of the above does not now exist as a coherent force. If it does take shape in the next few years, it will not appear as a socialist movement, but as a diverse and at times contradictory assortment of populist, feminist, radical-democratic, social democratic, and (crucially) anti-racist themes, without a primary socialist influence. The problem facing the socialist Left,⁸ in brief, is that on its own, it does not come close to having the public presence necessary to engage the crucial political struggles of the next few years. At the same time, it cannot assume that a mass Left to which it can play the role of responsible left critic will automatically appear.

Thus there is a dual task — to build a mass Left, and assist in a deliberate work of ideological and political reconstruction, and at the same time to seek to expand the capacities of the socialist Left itself. In the contemporary American context, this project could not conceivably be carried out on the model of traditional frontist conceptions in which an already finished and coherent socialist force elaborates a preexisting strategy through a series of interventions/alliances with other (progressive, often meaning 'less developed') political forces.

There now exists no such socialist force in this country, and building a significant socialist force is only possible as a process of mutual transformation between traditional socialist positions and their representatives, and the ideologies and political forces of a wide range of old and new popular movements. This argument can be



The American Communist Party (CPUSA) stood Gus Hall and Angela Davis as presidential and vice-presidential candidates respectively. They were entered on the ballot in 24 states. Commenting on the election results, its West Coast weekly *People's World* said 'with vote totals significantly improved in the industrial heartlands, the Communist Party is emphasising a new unity among progressive groups and people renewing its call for forming a broad based anti-monopoly coalition' (22 Nov 1980). The *Daily World*, its East Coast daily, indicated that 'the rightward turn in Washington has been intensified' with Reagan's election and urged a stepping up of 'fightback activities'. There could be nothing worse than negative apathy in the face of the new offensive' (13 Nov 1980).

grounded historically in an analysis of those moments at which the Left was most influential in American politics, and in an appreciation of the transitional nature of the present moment.

The last election saw an independent left campaign, by the newly formed Citizen's Party, centred on Barry Commoner's presidential candidacy. This campaign occurred in a year which offered the most conservative major party candidates in decades. It gained sufficient support to be placed on the ballot in most states. Yet the Citizen's Party received only 0.25% of the vote (larger than the *sum* of all the other left organisations that ran presidential campaigns). Part of this dreary outcome, quite a large part in fact, was due to the last-minute, grudging decision by many to vote for Carter against Reagan, the sort of decision made almost unavoidable by the existing party system. The 'lesson' of this experience is not that the Left, in its broad form, is as small as the vote for the Citizen's Party suggests. It is, rather, the need for a political strategy that would find means of linking together progressive forces within the Democratic Party with those small and scattered left forces outside it in such a fashion that the basis might exist for a mobilisation of sections of the vast non-voting population around a progressive political programme and vision.

American foreign policy

In concluding, I would like the above analysis briefly to relate to two problems that are bound to shape the next several years, and whose resolution will be crucial for politics in the US in this decade. Both problems concern theoretical and practical issues of concern for the Left in other countries as well.

First, there is the problem of American foreign policy and the posture of the Reagan administration. To this point, the most likely prospect seems to be that a rightist version of the Nixon-Kissinger policy on strategic relations with the Soviet Union will prevail, along with a brutal turn to the right in relations with third world nations, especially in Latin America. The American Left knows what to do in the latter case — though whether the strength to stop such a policy exists is another question. The former policy is much more difficult to cope with in the United States. It is not credible for the Right to argue that *any* outcome in El Salvador would threaten the national security of the US, unless that security is defined so narrowly as to refer primarily to the immediate physical security of some of America's clients in that nation. The question of relations with the Soviet Union is qualitatively different, of course, and demands very much more than the relatively simple oppositional stance that can form the basis for a mass opposition to American policy in Central America.

The spirit of the Reagan administration was captured quite well by foreign policy advisor Richard Allen, who after denouncing any form of Soviet intervention in Poland, allowed that the use of Polish troops to restore order and discipline the new unions would be perfectly acceptable, even praiseworthy. This stirring defence of national sovereignty — as the right of every nation's army to discipline its working class — marks clearly the political content of the anti-Soviet policies of the new administration. What is critical now is to avoid a

The likely immediate issues are busing and abortion

full return to a new cold war period, one which would close off the space for political manoeuvre both East and West. While the American Left bears a particular responsibility in this sphere, the possibility of avoiding an extraordinarily difficult and dangerous situation requires the concerted action of forces in many different countries.

Domestic politics

In domestic policy, it seems most likely that the main instruments of national economic policy will be placed in the hands of traditional Republican conservatives, with concessions to the new Right 'supply-side' economics of Jack Kemp.

This course leaves problematic the role of the far Right, whose mobilisation was crucial for Reagan's success, if not to the degree that the far Right itself claims. One possible scenario is for the administration to acquiesce in far right initiatives on 'social' issues. The likely immediate issues are busing and abortion, particularly the latter. A major anti-abortion initiative can now be undertaken through the Congress without explicit presidential support. It would place the women's movement in what would be perceived as a position determining its political future, a struggle on which no compromise was possible — at the same time that other popular groups were placed on the defensive by the traditional effects of severe anti-inflationary policies combined with the deeper processes of economic restructuring.

⁸ The socialist Left, which is very weak, is fairly diverse, with groups often centred on one region of the country (for example, California's Peace and Freedom Party). The CPUSA is a nationwide organisation, (*ed*).

This evolution of political conflicts would permit the Right to exploit existing divisions among potential oppositions. This possibility is particularly great because in the present situation, a firm defence of abortion rights is far from uniform among the leadership of popular movements other than the feminist movement, not to speak of the bases of those movements. It is not that such a sequence would represent a conscious strategic choice by the Right, or any of its components, but it might well emerge out of the struggles that now seem on the agenda. In the US, anti-feminism has seemingly played a greater direct role in building the Right in the last few years than in most other countries. Perhaps this is because the women's movement, proportionate to other progressive forces, is stronger in the US than elsewhere; perhaps it has to do with the particular manner in which family-related issues have intersected those involving the expansion of the state. Whatever the reason, struggles over defending the gains of


the women's movement in the last two decades may soon be central to national politics, especially in shaping the prospects of a left opposition, of helping to redefine the Left in a period of transition.

There is neither space nor reason to catalogue all the possible political confrontations which might develop in the near future. What should be emphasised is that the next several years are crucial for American politics for at least the remainder of the decade, and probably the remainder of the century. If the present situation seems bleak in the US — and it might seem even bleaker when viewed from outside the country — it should be remembered that the current alignment is unstable and subject to fairly rapid and dramatic change. Whether chances occur has much to do with whether the Left — including the socialist Left — is able to find means of preventing a consolidation of the Reagan victory, and of reshaping the terms of discussion of the basic political issues now framed by the Right.

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