

Michael Harrington and the Twilight of Capitalism

July 18, 2009

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, Where wealth accumulates, and men decay —
Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village* (1770)

Michael Harrington is rarely taken seriously as a Marxist thinker — indeed, his Marxism is rarely taken seriously at all, by either his critics or sympathizers. In his biography of Harrington, *The Other American*, Maurice Isserman notes that Harrington “remained a Marxist to the end,” but the Marxist elements of his works often proved “too dilute for the true *marxisantes* among his audience and too abstruse for everyone else.” My aim is to challenge the idea that Harrington’s explicitly Marxist writings are either dilute or abstruse, and explain their importance. I believe that Harrington was one of the twentieth century’s best popularizers of Marx. Far from being rarefied, Harrington was capable of giving a very accessible version of Marx’s understanding of capitalism. As Isserman relates, Harrington explained capitalism as “a self-contradictory system that drew people together in productive enterprise and yet drove them apart through the unequal distribution of resources” — more specifically, a system where goods and services are produced collectively but the ownership and control of resources is owned “individually,” by a minority class of capitalists. The result is what Harrington called “an unsocial socialization,” one which was “subverting its most priceless accomplishment, the possibility of freedom and justice,” to use words from Harrington’s final book *Socialism: Past and Future*. To this Harrington counterpoised a truly social socialization — “a democratic, bottom-up control by the majority.” In the absence of a movement to make real this ideal, humanity will lack any positive, emancipatory alternative to what Harrington labeled “a ‘slow apocalypse,’ a transition to a new civilization that could occur before we are even aware of it.” Phrased differently, Harrington stressed the need for a socialist response to the decline of capitalism — or, to quote the title of his book of 1976, the twilight of capitalism. Harrington wrote in *The Twilight of Capitalism*:

“...capitalism has collectivized its contradictions but not abolished them. In the process, it has unquestionably won time, like a patient restored to health, but by a miracle drug whose side effects will eventually kill him. One cannot set a date, or even a decade when the last scene will be played out or specify how long it will last. And it would be foolish to suggest that our heirs will necessarily inherit a millennium that will be socialist and humane. The successor to capitalism will be collectivist, of course. That has already been settled, and conservative Republican Presidents unwittingly promote this trend. But there are many possibilities within this tendency, the totalitarian, the authoritarian and the democratic-socialist among them. “...the welfare state is...an ambiguous and transitional phenomenon, the temporary salvation of the system, but also the portent of its end.”

This aspect of Harrington’s thinking has been attacked as a “teleological” remnant of orthodox Marxism that Harrington should have cut out of this thinking. *Dissent* author Sheri Berman has labeled Harrington’s belief that “capitalism’s apparent triumphs were fictional and that the system was really on its way out” as “not merely...wrong, but also...counterproductive,” serving “to

persuade the left that its chief task was not to reform and humanize capitalism but rather to press for its passing.” But besides Berman’s lack of understanding of how Marxists see the fight for reforms and for socialism as innately connected — that the way to achieve goals both near and far is to increase the self-organization, political consciousness, and capacity for collective action of the wage-dependent majority class — she fails to see the evidence around her of capitalism’s decline because she does not look at the system’s intrinsic social relations. Capitalist production continues to become more and more (unsocially) socialized and organized via the growth of monopoly firms; the growth of needs-based sectors such as health and education; the rise in unproductive labor; arms production; and other areas of state intervention. Such tendencies have endured despite conservatives’ (and mainstream social democrats’) mania for privatization; the most obvious example is the inevitable bailout of big banks by the Bush administration, which could not simply afford to let market logic take its course. However much pro-capitalist ideologues may hate it, the simple fact is that capitalism cannot reproduce itself without such interference with market forces; it cannot help but collectivize itself. Harrington thus saw capitalism as a declining system. This decline cannot be measured simply by the degeneration of capitalism’s productive forces. What is key is that capitalism has consistently underdeveloped the real *potential* of the productive forces; it has *misused* the surplus product extracted from the direct producers. Capitalist governments will even go so far as to impede the effects of (unsocial) socialization, to the point of deindustrialization, which was a deliberate strategy of the Thatcher government in Britain to smash the trade unions. Such governments will shift production towards useless sectors such as the military, which in Harrington’s words “has the marvelous quality of conferring subsidized profits on inefficient corporations which produce goods that do not...compete with the output of other firms in the consumer market.” But, as the Marxian economist Hillel Ticktin explains in his essay “The Epoch of Decline,”

“...it is in the nature of the development of the forces of production that labour must be socialised and this cannot be changed, except through disaccumulation, i.e. capital ceasing to be capital. ...This interpretation is basic to Marxism because it is Marx’s view that the fundamental contradiction of capitalism lies in the relationship between the increasing socialisation of labour and the ever fewer magnates of capital. The contradiction only ends with the demise of capitalism.”

Harrington agreed, and was right to do so. Even as American socialists press for welfare-state reforms that will have the immediate effect of making capitalism more bearable, it is incumbent upon us to make clear that such measures can only, as Harrington said, “provide...limited concessions to the needs of the vast majority,” even in the best of times, and that the best of times — the Golden Age of the welfare state (1940-73) — have clearly passed. The socialist task is not to help people “adjust to capitalism,” as Berman would have it, but to ensure that the collectivism of the future is a socialist democracy.