

1 **Liberals and the Marxist Heresy**

2 Critics of Capitalism were once drawn to Marx. But dissent and disloyalty are
3 poles apart.

4• Reinhold Niebuhr

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9 **The spate of Congressional investigations**, ostensibly intended to ferret out remnants of
10 disloyalty in the schools and colleges, in the churches, and in the entertainment
11 industries, are manifestations of an old tension between the business community of
12 America and the so-called "intellectuals." The former has achieved formal political power
13 for the first time in two decades and it seems intent on evening the score and venting its
14 resentments against its critics of the past decades. The more unscrupulous and demagogic
15 representatives of the Republican Party seek to do this by proving the critics to be
16 involved, directly or indirectly, with the hated conspiracy all good men abhor. The
17 temptation to embarrass the critics of a business civilization was strong, even for those
18 who are not given to the arts of demagogy, for it is a fact that the critics were informed by
19 various shades and versions of a dogma which, in its most consistent form, led to the
20 sorry realities of Communist tyranny.

21 It is, of course, necessary in the interest of democratic justice and for the sake of
22 our unity with the remainder of the free world, to resist unscrupulous efforts to
23 obscure all shades and distinctions on the Left, and to prove every critic to be in
24 either explicit or implicit connivance with a hated enemy. But it is also necessary
25 for those of us who account ourselves among the critics to confess to the
26 remarkable influence of the Marxist dogma on our viewpoints, even while we
27 resist the efforts of the demagogues to identify every form of dissent with
28 Communism.

29 The term "intellectuals" is somewhat vague, particularly in America; but it
30 designates, however inexactly, the more articulate members of the community,
31 more particularly those who are professionally or vocationally articulate, in
32 church and school, in journalism and the arts. It is altogether healthy that these
33 articulate members of the community should assume the task of criticism or
34 should have had that task imposed on them by the criteria of their several
35 disciplines, whether religious, academic or esthetic. It is as natural as it is
36 inevitable that the so-called men of affairs, whether in business or government,
37 should be inclined to be more complacent, whether because preoccupation with
38 practical affairs prevents critical thinking or because their interest creates an
39 ideological stake in the status quo, or because practical experience endows men
40 with wisdom proving the tenets of the critics abstract and illusory. Since the latter
41 factor is present in the attitudes of the business community, though in a minor
42 role, it behooves those of us who were and are the critics of our civilization to
43 confess to the power of an abstract dogma over our minds, even while we resist
44 the unscrupulous efforts to relate every form of dissent with the extreme form of
45 the dogma, or even with disloyalty.

46 The most obvious distinction in the interest of fairness is to note the rigorous
47 resistance to Communism by Democratic Socialists in all nations. The attitudes of
48 Norman Thomas in this country, of the late Ernst Reuter in Berlin, and Henri
49 Spaak in Belgium and many others is sufficient refutation of the outrageous
50 charge that a common Marxist dogma creates an affinity between Communism
51 and Socialism. Socialism and Communism may be brothers; if so, they are, as the
52 late Socialist leader Kurt Schumacher observed, like Cain and Abel. The common
53 Marxist dogma not only failed to guarantee affinity with Communism, but it has
54 not prevented Socialism from being a creative force, when it expressed itself in
55 loyalty to and in the context of a democratic community. A large part of the free
56 world is indebted to the Socialist movement for the establishment of justice. The
57 efforts of our vigilantes to brand the movement with the mark of Cain therefore
58 alienates our friends and seems to substantiate prejudices of their own about our
59 life.

60 It must be admitted that the intellectuals, committed or uncommitted to Socialist
61 parties, do not have as good a record of discernment as do the party leaders.
62 Some of them, like the late Harold Laski, could not make up their minds whether
63 to condemn Russia as a tyranny or to exalt her as the harbinger of a new culture.
64 Mr. Laski was equally uncertain whether to extol our own nation as an open
65 society or to condemn us as a capitalistic one. In a similar fashion, the Swedish
66 social scientist, Gunnar Myrdal, despite his intimate relation with our culture,
67 was prompted by the Marxist dogma to adopt a defeatist attitude toward our

68 future. He was so sure our economy would collapse after the war that he
69 persuaded Sweden to engage in a very unadvantageous trade agreement with
70 Russia. The examples of Laski and Myrdal will remind us that intellectuals are
71 more easily swayed by Marxist dogma than the workingmen who constitute the
72 bulk of the Socialist movement and who, as Lenin confessed, would not rise
73 unaided, above a "trade-union psychology." That is, they would reject utopian
74 illusions and be content with proximate goals of justice.

75 In America the Marxist ideology had a surprisingly strong hold on the
76 intellectualist critics of capitalism, despite the absence of a Socialist movement
77 giving their ideas relevance. The "New Deal," a characteristically pragmatic effort
78 to resolve the debate between classical economics and Marxism, was consciously
79 or unconsciously dependent upon the thought of the late Lord Keynes. It fell
80 under criticism of intellectuals prompted by obvious Marxist prejudices. But their
81 Marxism was not consistent; it included every shade of opinion from open
82 hospitality to Communism, to secret or open sympathy for the Communist cause.

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84 **Many of the intellectuals** who were at first attracted by Communism were
85 subsequently repelled by the realities of Communist politics, particularly as these
86 revealed themselves in the purge trials of the early 30s, the Nazi-Soviet pact and
87 the chicane of the Communist Party in the Spanish Civil War. A group of very
88 distinguished intellectuals have left a record of their initial illusions and
89 subsequent disillusion in the symposium *The God That Failed*: a moving
90 revelation both of the spiritual and political confusions of our day and a proof
91 that moral sensitivity and utopian longings were responsible for their attraction
92 to Communism. The realities of Communist politics are in such vivid contrast to
93 the moral motives for original allegiance that those converts who have not broken
94 with Communism have become more and more pathetic in seeking to cover their
95 mistaken loyalty with ever more implausible interpretations of present realities.
96 Some have assumed an attitude of neutrality and "objectivity," pretending to be
97 able to criticize both Soviet and American policies with equal severity and equal
98 justification.

99 Of those who have renounced their Communist faith, some have, in the violence
100 of their reaction, embraced the dogmas of the extreme right, thus exchanging
101 creeds but not varying the spirit and temper of their approach to life's problems.
102 A few have found profit or prestige as professional anti-Communists. Others—for
103 example, the redoubtable young editor, James Wechsler, and the famous Mayor
104 Reuter of Berlin—have expiated an earlier Communist loyalty by a rigorous anti-
105 Communist, but thoroughly liberal, democratic faith. It is ironic that men who
106 extricated themselves with least hurt to their spirit are now declared suspect by

107 our vigilantes because they have not proved their repentance by adhesion to some
108 dogma of the Right or by imitating its hysteria.

109 Among the intellectuals who have not explicitly disavowed earlier Communist
110 sympathy, many have gradually taken a more and more critical attitude toward
111 Communist politics. Some of these would probably be surprised if confronted
112 with early writings in which they made ridiculous estimates of Russia as the holy
113 land of a new culture. The number actually involved in the Communist
114 conspiracy was very small. Professor Hook is probably right, however, in
115 charging liberal sentiment on the Left with the error of complacency toward the
116 danger of conspiracy. Many thought of Communism chiefly as a heresy with
117 which they might not agree but which must be granted that tolerance the
118 traditional liberal extends to all dissent. They were thus as indiscriminating as
119 the Right, which is eager to identify every form of dissent with disloyalty or even
120 with treason. The Hiss trial had particular significance. It was a traumatic
121 experience on the Right, for it seemed to confirm all of its worst fears and
122 established prejudices. The Left, however, assumed Hiss's innocence and
123 regarded the proceedings against him as no more than an effort to attack the
124 Roosevelt Administration. In Europe Hiss's innocence is still widely taken for
125 granted.

126 While fairness demands that distinctions among the opinions on the Left be
127 established, the intellectuals must with corresponding honesty admit the
128 universality of the Marxist dogma over their minds. In one sense the breadth and
129 extent of that is not a mystery. The critics of a business civilization wished to
130 challenge the moral and intellectual assumptions guarding the complacency of
131 the culture. Those assumptions had been stated by Adam Smith, who based his
132 thought upon an earlier physiocratic dogma. According to that dogma, freedom
133 in economic life would automatically bring justice, if only men would rigorously
134 refrain from interfering with the operation of "nature's laws." This view assumed
135 an analogy between historical and natural events which was not true; and it
136 guaranteed social harmonies which the social tensions of a growing technical
137 society violently contradicted. If the injustices of a business society were to be
138 challenged what would seem more relevant than the Marxist dogma? The social
139 realities seemed to validate its presuppositions rather than the optimism of the
140 liberal dogma. Furthermore, it lacked the rigorous and enervating determinism of
141 the liberal dogma and appealed to the human impulse to master historical
142 destiny.

143 Pious criticisms of Marxist determinism are somewhat ironic, considering that
144 the business community follows a more deterministic creed. The danger in the
145 Marxist creed derives, not from its determinism, but from its pretension that men

146 can, at a particular climax in human affairs, triumph not only over injustice but
147 over man's ambiguous role in history and become masters of history. This
148 ambition to achieve mastery of historical destiny conformed to one part of liberal
149 secularism, exemplified by August Comte. There is, therefore, good reason for the
150 power of the Marxist dogma over the minds of the intellectuals and critics of a
151 business civilization. Unfortunately for them, and for our civilization, the Marxist
152 dogma was a mistaken dogma upon which capitalistic culture rests. It was doubly
153 unfortunate that the Marxist errors led to worse injustices than those which
154 prevailed in our free society. The dogma of the Right sought to reduce the power
155 of the state; but it preserved the multiplicity of power centers in society. The
156 dogma of Marxism assumed that the socialization of property would eliminate
157 economic power from human affairs. This was a great mistake, for it led to the
158 concentration of both economic and political power in a single oligarchy. The
159 resulting tyranny must therefore be regarded not as the fortuitous corruption of
160 an original Marxist ideal but as the inevitable fruit of its illusions.

161 All the errors in the rightist dogma could not efface its one virtue: preserving a
162 multiplicity of power centers in society. And all the virtues of the Marxist dogma
163 could not efface the evil effects of its single great error: creating a monopoly of
164 power. The moral embarrassment of the intellectuals derives from accepting
165 Marxist dogma too uncritically, failing to perceive its error. In the democratic
166 world, Marxism did not lead to the noxious consequences of the totalitarian state
167 chiefly because the dogma was not consistently expressed or applied.

168 The fact is that an economy can neither be totally regulated nor totally
169 unregulated; just as men can be neither masters of their historical fate nor mere
170 prisoners of destiny. Neither dogma is totally true. Modern communities do not
171 live in the harmony assumed by the one dogma, nor do they move inevitably to a
172 climax of social tension as the other dogma assumes. So the healthiest modern
173 nations have distilled truth from the tension between both equally untenable
174 dogmas and have preserved their health by practices which followed neither too
175 consistently. That is probably why Britain is spiritually the healthiest of modern
176 nations, however precarious her economic health may be. There the creed of the
177 business community was qualified by an older aristocratic tradition, and the
178 creed of a quasi-Marxist party was leavened by an older and more pragmatic
179 Christian radicalism. Thus the struggle between contradictory creeds was
180 mitigated, and the comparative equality of strength between social forces,
181 holding allegiance to each creed, has prevented the unequivocal triumph of
182 either. America, by comparison, is less favorably endowed. The absence of a
183 strong Marxist movement has led to the triumph of the opposite creed without
184 serious challenge; and the present effort of our vigilantes to wipe out or discredit

185 every form of critical dissent not only makes our political thinking inflexible but
186 deepens the rift between ourselves and the free nations of Europe and Asia.
187 Oddly enough our business community is more pragmatic in the management of
188 its affairs than in its political creed. Whether because of its practical wisdom or
189 because of the policies of a political movement which it opposed and abhorred,
190 our history has not been as catastrophic as it seemed that it might be in the
191 1930s. Then, general defeatism among the critics, and among some of the
192 defenders of our economy was one of the primary reasons for Marxism's
193 attraction. Recently a friend wrote to congratulate me on my accuracy in
194 predicting the inevitable corruptions of power in the Soviet state in a book I wrote
195 in 1934. Upon rereading the book to enjoy the experience of justified prophecy, I
196 discovered that my wisdom was not as perfect as the friend suggested. *Reflections*
197 *on the End of an Era* was a perfect revelation of the pessimistic assumptions,
198 prompted by Marxist thought, which had informed one who was challenging at
199 least some of the Marxist illusions. History is fortunately not as predictable as
200 those who invent a logic to contain it can imagine. Our civilization is not as free of
201 problems as the conservative dogmatists pretend. But we were able to survive the
202 stresses of the war with rather more residual health than was anticipated. The
203 Nazi peril was moreover something quite different from the final desperate
204 defensive action of capitalism Marxist analysis made it. In reality it was a lower
205 middle-class revolt against a weakened civilization.

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207 **It is an ironic** fact that the actual "class struggle" between owners and workers
208 has been less severe, and characterized by more accommodations of interest, in
209 America than in Europe. We therefore enjoy a measure of political and moral
210 health. But the ideological struggle between the defenders and the intellectual
211 critics of our economy has been more severe than in Europe. It threatens at the
212 present time to sow confusion both within our boundaries and between ourselves
213 and our allies. Thus adherence to inflexible dogmas, and dishonesty in taking
214 advantage of an ideological foe, threatens to undo whatever a wisdom in practical
215 affairs has established in this nation.

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