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JOHN C. CALHOUN, PHILOSOPHER OF REACTION

By RICHARD NELSON CURRENT

THE SHADE of John C. Calhoun, who died in 1850, still haunts the Southern scene. He, after all, was the original architect of the Solid South. He it was who took Jefferson's liberal doctrine of State Rights and identified it with a policy of reaction. He, more than anyone else, made the presence of the Negro an occasion for repressing white men along with black. Wherever contemporary Bourbons take counsel together, somewhere in their midst hovers the ghost of the Great Nullifier.

Today the keepers of the reactionary tradition find much to take counsel about. Fissures are appearing in the masonry of their Solid South, with all which that implies. The cross winds of the New Deal have shaken the venerable structure, and the disturbing currents of the Four Freedoms are giving it another buffeting. Not that the time has come to predict its early collapse, for it withstood the disruptive gusts of Populism in the 1890's and recovered quickly enough from the inroads of Republicanism in 1928. Indeed, the Solid South was created in the first place as a windbreak against external storms of popular aspiration—as a defense, that is, against the threats of “outside agitators”—and the harder the winds have blown, the more urgent has been the motive to patch and shore it up. No matter what political realignments may be in store for 1944 or 1948, such are the repercussions of the challenge of the new democracy, from Hindustan to Harlem and beyond, that reactionary leaders in the South will be bound to maintain some kind of effective solidarity behind the Mason and Dixon front.

The problem they now face is remarkably like the one Calhoun had to contend with in his day, for the vicissitudes of a century have altered the picture only in its details. *Plus ça change, plus la même chose*. The central theme of Southern history has remained the same, but this theme is not what the older school of Southern historians said it was—the maintenance of white supremacy. It is the maintenance of the supremacy of *some* white men, and as a means to this end the fiction of a general white

supremacy has been extremely useful. In Calhoun's day the myth took the form of the "proslavery argument," which in truth was inspired not so much by the agitation of Northern fanatics as by the democratic questionings of Southern slaveless farmers. One of Calhoun's own proslavery arguments was this, that simply to turn the Negroes loose without giving them full civic and social rights would not be to free them at all but only to change the form of their bondage: they would cease to be slaves of individual masters and become slaves of the community as a whole. As applied to the group servitude which Calhoun thus foretold, abolition continues to be a live issue in the South. The W. P. A., for example, was abolitionist when it provided alternative employment at unwonted wages for low-paid "colored help." So is the war-time industrial program, wherever Negroes are allowed to compete freely for jobs. So, too, are the world-wide stirrings accompanying this second war for, ostensibly, the establishment of human rights.

The preservation of a South solid against the Negro may well depend on what interests *outside the South* can be enlisted in its defense. This, also, the prophetic Calhoun realized in his day. When he called upon the South to unite, as he did again and again, he was often accused of having "something very sinister," like secession, in mind. He disavowed such aims and assured suspicious Northerners that a "union" of Southerners was a distinct benefit to the larger Union itself and to all concerned. It was, in fact, essential to the smooth working of the machinery of the federal constitution. "The machine never works well when the South is divided," Calhoun declared, "nor badly when it is united." He strove consistently to win Northern sympathy and support for his united South. In these efforts there lurked something really more sinister, in its significance for American democracy, than any thought of disunion.

The true meaning of Calhoun's career has not been clearly understood. In the minds of most students of American history, the South Carolinian stands as the pre-eminent spokesman for the contemporary planting interests of his state and section and, by virtue of that position, also as the chief political foe of the rising captains of industry in the North. He was, of course, the planter champion, yet he himself insisted that he was "no enemy of manufactures or of manufacturers, but quite the reverse," and he was heard to say that the "interests of the *gentlemen* of the North and of the South" were "identical." There is ample ground for

taking him at his word. Although he detested the political program of the industrialists, he beheld another danger far greater than what they had to offer. In the rise of a proletariat in the industrial states he foresaw a menace to the security of factory owners and plantation proprietors alike. While, both as a politician and as a theorist, he defended the slave system against the encroachments of the capitalist economy, at the same time he aspired to a grander role as leader of a combined conservatism against the universal forces of revolt.

Historians have completely overlooked the key to Calhoun's political philosophy. That key is a concept of the class struggle. Before Calhoun, other Southern thinkers, notably James Madison and John Taylor of Caroline, had given expression to more or less well developed ideas of the conflict of social classes, for this was a notion familiar enough to a generation of Americans brought up largely on the history of ancient Greece and Rome. But these others took a liberal view, John Taylor, for one, favoring co-operation of farmers and artisans against their mutual enemy, the moneyed power. Calhoun was strictly the reactionary. Unlike the others, moreover, he used a terminology and treatment which in many respects anticipated the later "scientific" approach of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.

He started, as Marx and Engels were also to do, with John Locke's so-called labor theory of value. From that assumption he deduced that in all contemporary and historical societies, except the most primitive, there existed a system of exploitation of a working class. "Let those who are interested remember," he once wrote, "that labor is the only source of wealth, and how small a portion of it, in all old and civilized countries, even the best governed, is left to those by whose labor wealth is created." On another occasion he repeated that "there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other," and that "it would not be difficult to trace the various devices by which the wealth of all civilized communities has been so unequally divided, and to show by what means so small a share has been allotted to those by whose labor it was produced, and so large a share given to the nonproducing classes." Unlike the Marxists, Calhoun did not define the capitalistic producing and nonproducing groups in terms at all precise. He referred to them variously, and loosely, as "the poor" and "the rich," "labor" and "capital," "the operatives" and

“the capitalists,” “the ignorant and dependent” and “the intelligence of the community,” “the needy and corrupt” and “the wealthy and talented,” and so forth—terms slightly descriptive but extremely evaluative.

Calhoun anticipated a number of the other Marxist doctrines. Among these were the following: (1) the eventual division of society into only two classes, capitalist and proletarian; (2) the gradual expropriation of the bulk of the population by the capitalists, so that the propertied would become fewer and fewer and the property-less more and more numerous; and (3) the ultimate impoverishment of the masses to a bare subsistence level. All this would come about through capitalist control and use of the powers of the State. Thus, in a conversation in 1831, Calhoun “took the instance of 100 men without a Govt. [and] showed the equilibrium that would prevail. Supposed a Government that would give \$5000 to ten of the hundred and then traced the tendency of the Capital to eradicate [*sic*] the possession of the soil, and to reduce the 90 to a state of simple operatives.” There were various fiscal means by which governments might present a bounty to a favored group and so enable it to expropriate the rest, but the chief of these devices (as John Taylor also had pointed out) was the protective tariff. Such governmental “intermeddling” in economic affairs was the cause, in Europe, of the “unequal and unjust distribution of wealth between the several classes or portions of the community.” The first effect of the tariff in the United States had been to enrich the North and impoverish the South, but the time would come when it would redistribute property as between the social classes rather than the geographical sections. “After [the planters] are exhausted,” Calhoun warned,

the contest will be between the capitalists and operatives; for into these two classes it must, ultimately, divide society. The issue of the struggle here must be the same as it has been in Europe. Under the operation of the [protective] system, wages must sink more rapidly than the prices of the necessaries of life, till the operatives will be reduced to the lowest point,—when the portion of the products of their labor left to them, will be barely sufficient to preserve existence.

As a result of the exploitation and expropriation of the working class, according to Calhoun, there would follow an inevitable social conflict, which would grow more and more severe as the conditions producing it became more extreme, until it must eventuate in a revolutionary crisis. “It is useless to disguise the fact,” the gentleman from South Carolina frankly informed his fellow Senators in 1837. “There is and always has been in

an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labor and capital." This "tendency to conflict in the North," he said at another time, "is constantly on the increase." And again: "Where wages command labor, as in the nonslaveholding States, there necessarily takes place between labor and capital a conflict, which leads, in process of time, to disorder, anarchy, and revolution, if not counteracted by some appropriate and strong constitutional provision." Calhoun explained this a little more fully when he wrote that

as the community becomes populous, wealthy, refined, and highly civilized, the difference between the rich and the poor will become more strongly marked; and the number of the ignorant and dependent greater in proportion to the rest of the community. With the increase of this difference, the tendency to conflict between them will become stronger; and, as the poor and dependent become more numerous . . . there will be . . . no want of leaders among the wealthy and ambitious, to excite and direct them in their efforts to obtain the control.

Here Calhoun doubtless had in mind the history of the Greek city-states and the Roman republic, but he was nevertheless predicting the defection from the bourgeoisie of leaders to aid the proletariat in its revolutionary struggle. This was an idea to which Marx and Engels attached a great deal of importance in the *Communist Manifesto*.

In his political prognoses Calhoun revealed a rather definite notion of historical determinism. As he watched "the unfolding of the great events" leading to the European revolutionary movements of 1848, he was confident he could predict the outcome, for he had the benefit of "principles . . . drawn from facts in the moral world just as certain as any in the physical." He insisted "it ought never to be forgotten that *the past is the parent of the present*" (he underlined the words). But he did not believe the historical process was always one of continuous growth. Thus "the past condition of Europe," though it had "given birth" to the most advanced civilization hitherto known, might have, "indeed, contained within itself causes calculated to retard or prevent a further progress." The continued advance of material improvement, growing out of the many inventions and discoveries of the preceding century, could be expected only if the changes in means and methods of production and distribution should be accompanied by suitable changes in the organization of society and government.

"What I dread," wrote Calhoun, expressing his own concept of cultural lag, "is, that progress in political science falls far short of progress

in that which relates to matter, and which may lead to convulsions and revolutions that may retard or even arrest the former." When he took a long-run view, however, he was optimistic. The myriad discoveries and inventions, particularly "the application of steam to machinery of almost every description," though they would "cause changes, political and social, difficult to be anticipated," must in the end accrue to the good of mankind.

It is, however, not improbable, that many and great, but temporary evils, will follow the changes they have effected, and are destined to effect. It seems to be a law in the political, as well as in the material world, that great changes cannot be made, except very gradually, without convulsions and revolutions; to be followed by calamities, in the beginning, however beneficial they may prove to be in the end. The first effect of such changes, on long established governments, will be, to unsettle the opinions and principles in which they originated,—and which have guided their policy,—before those, which the changes are calculated to form and establish, are fairly developed and understood. The interval between the decay of the old and the formation and establishment of the new, constitutes a period of transition, which must always necessarily be one of uncertainty, confusion, error, and wild and fierce fanaticism.

The chief of the "erroneous opinions" characterizing this transitional period would be the belief in rule by the "numerical majority," a belief based upon the "false conception" that men had once lived in a state of nature and could therefore claim liberty and equality as natural rights. It was this error—the Four Freedoms of that time—which was "upheaving Europe" in 1848. The falsity of the democratic dogma would soon become apparent, because, according to Calhoun's dialectic, an overextension of liberty must lead to "a contraction instead of an enlargement of its sphere." Unlimited democracy would be followed by anarchy, and then an "appeal to force," and finally dictatorship, "monarchy in its absolute form." Out of the contradictions in society that produced the chaos, however, an entirely different synthesis might emerge through the application of political science. And by "political science" Calhoun meant of course his theory of "concurrent majorities" with all its paraphernalia, including some scheme of federation and the power of "interposition" by the member states, that is, Nullification or its equivalent. Hence, in 1848, he cherished some hope for Germany, where there already existed the elements of a federation out of which the "dread" of French radicalism might produce "a federal system somewhat like ours." About the fate of France her-

self he was pessimistic and, accurately enough, predicted that she would soon "find herself in the embrace of a military despotism."

In no single writing did the Carolina philosopher-statesman systematically develop his views on the class struggle and his materialistic interpretation of history. He gave fragmentary expression to these ideas on scattered occasions—in private letters, public reports, conversations, and speeches, and in one of his two treatises on government. From these various sources the parts must be extracted and rearranged if they are to make a systematic whole. For Calhoun was interested less in composing a well rounded statement of the theory than in using it for the practical purpose of defending the property of the planters.

On behalf of the planter class he appealed again and again to fellow conservatives among the bankers and manufacturers of the North. As each great sectional issue came to a head between 1828 and 1850, he was ready with a new instalment of his class-struggle argument. He made the first public statement of his thesis (anonymously) in the famous South Carolina *Exposition* itself, in which he denounced the tariff of 1828 and proposed his Nullification procedure as a remedy for the South, but in which he also warned that protectionism would ruin the planter class and leave Northern employers to fight alone the coming battle with their employees. In 1834, when the bank issue was intensified by a sharp financial crisis, he took occasion to point out that a banking system with power to swell and shrink the money supply was as dangerous as the protective system in causing an uneconomic distribution of wealth and hastening the day of revolution. In 1836, reporting to the Senate on "incendiary" abolition literature, he told the propertied classes of the North that they ought to be as much concerned in this matter as the Southern slaveholders themselves, because "a very slight modification" of the arguments used to attack property in slaves "would make them equally effectual" against property of all kinds. In 1851 he criticized Henry Clay's distribution bill (for dividing among the several states the proceeds from the sale of public lands) by asserting that its effect would be to array "one class against another." And during the Mexican War he took his stand against the conquest of *all* of Mexico (large areas of which were unsuited to slavery) on the ground that the creation of an American empire would lead to dangerous social changes within the older Union.

The main point in Calhoun's case against abolition—that the elimination of slavery in the South would prepare the way for social revolution in the North—was a distinctive contribution to the text of the proslavery argument. The Carolinian reasoned that the conflict between capital and labor, with all its “disorders and dangers,” could have no place in the Southern scheme of life. “The Southern States are an aggregate, in fact, of communities, not of individuals. Every plantation is a little community, with the master at its head, who concentrates in himself the united interests of capital and labor, of which he is the common representative.” Naturally, according to the reasoning of the planter mind, this arrangement made slavery “a good—a positive good” for both the master and the slave, a creature better fed, clothed, and housed, and happier than the Northern workingman. But Calhoun emphasized that it made slavery a positive benefit for the Northern capitalist as well. “The blessing of this state of things,” he said, “extends beyond the limits of the South. It makes that section the balancer of the [constitutional] system; the great conservative power, which prevents other portions, less fortunately constituted, from rushing into conflict.” For this reason, the capitalists should not oppose the extension of slavery into the West; they ought to realize that they had as much to gain as the planters themselves in preserving an “equilibrium” of slave and free states. And if the quarrel over the territories should threaten to end in disunion, the Northerners and not the Southerners were the ones who ought to count the cost of that event. The South could live safely to itself, for the very need of defending its peculiar institution would “bind its various and conflicting interests together.” The North, however, possessed no such “central point of union,” and if deprived of the stabilizing influence of the “conservative” section, would soon be torn apart as a result of social conflict.

Not only American capitalists but also the British ruling classes had a stake in the preservation of Southern slavery. According to Calhoun's logic, there was no real difference between the subjection of one man to another, as in the South, and the subjection of one class to another, as in the British Isles, or the subjection of one nation to another, as in the British Empire. Hence, in encouraging abolition, the rulers of the Empire were attacking the very principle upon which their own position rested, and were giving rise to such “convulsive” movements as chartism in England and socialism in France.

Calhoun's appeal to the Northern capitalist before the Civil War was like Marx's appeal to the Northern workingman after the war had begun: both the great reactionary and the great revolutionary, though for exactly opposite purposes, contended that the destruction of capitalism would come only after the destruction of the slave economy.

Calhoun believed it was possible to find a basis for the resolving of planter-capitalist quarrels, for he thought their causes less fundamental than those which provoked the labor-capitalist conflict. Between the planter and the manufacturer there was no ineradicable antagonism of economic interest. From no such contrariety had abolitionism arisen: it originated in "fanaticism" and gained strength only because of the close division of parties in the North, which gave politicians a motive for catering to antislavery sentiment. Nor would protectionism, once the tariff question was rightly understood, remain a barrier to co-operation between the cotton grower and the textile maker. Calhoun would advise the manufacturers—"if they would hear the voice of one who has ever wished them well"—that the domestic market was entirely "too scanty" for their resources and their skill. They should abandon the protective system, which limited exports in proportion as it checked imports, and "march forth fearlessly to meet the world in competition." Once they had "commanded" the foreign market, "all conflict between the planter and the manufacturer would cease." Upon such a policy of commercial imperialism, with cotton going out of the country not as raw stuff but as yarn and fabric, millowners and plantation proprietors might unite in mutual prosperity.

Or so Calhoun averred, at any rate. And if he had thus found an economic basis, he was even more confident that he had discovered a political basis for the alliance—his familiar doctrine of State Rights and Nullification. This was his "common constitutional ground, on which the reflecting and patriotic, of every quarter of the Union, might rally to arrest the approaching catastrophe" of social revolution. His scheme of polity, as outlined in many reports and speeches and summed up and reformulated in *A Disquisition on Government* and *A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*, provided for "State interposition" to veto acts of the federal government and for secession by the individual state as a last resort. But he himself minimized these negative aspects and emphasized the positive, constructive, "conservative" features of his sys-

tem. The arbiter, in case a disaffected state interposed to challenge the validity of a federal law, was to consist of three-fourths of the whole number of states. A group of commonwealths comprising one more than a fourth of the whole, Calhoun admitted, could negative the interpretation of federal powers made by the rest. This very requirement of widespread unanimity among the "concurrent majorities," however, would tend to make the leaders in all the states less demanding, more conciliatory. It would create union and strength, not division and weakness. It would ameliorate, not worsen the relations between the sections. And thus it would enable the planters of the South and the capitalists of the North to act together harmoniously in the face of a wave of revolution that threatened to engulf them both.

Presenting as he did a common ground for planter-capitalist collaboration against the class enemy, Calhoun intended his theory not merely as a bogey with which to frighten the manufacturers into yielding on the sectional issues of the day. Anyhow, he was not so naïve as to suppose that his words, by themselves, could induce the capitalists to see the light. "That any force of argument can change public opinion . . .," he wrote in 1831, "I do not expect; but I feel assured that the coming confusion and danger, which I have long foreseen, will." Though the revolutionary movements then under way in Europe failed to have the repercussions which he anticipated for the United States, the time of confusion and danger finally seemed at hand when the financial crisis of 1834 beset the nation. Calhoun now persuaded himself that his doctrines were rapidly growing popular among the well-to-do in the North. Thousands were beginning to look to the South for protection not only against the "usurpation" of Andrew Jackson, but also against the "needy and corrupt" among their own population. "They begin to feel," Calhoun congratulated himself, "that they have more to fear from their own people, than we from our slaves." A year later, though the financial crisis had passed without fulfilling his expectations, he still nourished a hope that the capitalists would be converted sooner or later through fear of a mass uprising. "The first victims would be the wealthy and talented of the North," he thought.

The intelligence of the North must see this, but whether in time to save themselves and the institutions of the country God only knows. But whenever their eyes may open, they will be astonished to find that the doctrines which they denounce as treason are the only means of their political salvation, while those

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which they so fondly hugged to their bosom were working their certain destruction.

In 1848, when Calhoun was completing his *Disquisition on Government*, he similarly felt that he could win Northern converts only after the “failure and embarrassment of the French experiment” should have “prepared” the “publick mind” by putting the capitalists in a receptive mood. Not his persuasions, then, but a crisis in the class struggle itself would bring the Northern capitalists into an alliance with the Southern planters.

Thus Calhoun supposed that, in the United States, the decisive clash between proletariat and bourgeoisie would appear before the decisive clash between bourgeoisie and landed aristocracy—an order of events that in Marxian theory was to be reversed. If his anticipations had been met, the American Civil War would have been a class war in which Northerners and Southerners fought together against a common foe. To explain why it was actually otherwise would involve a retelling of ante-bellum history, but in part what happened seems to be this: Just as the plantation politicians had succeeded in solidifying Southern opinion through the proslavery argument, so the politicians of Northern business eventually unified the diverse interests of their section with antislavery propaganda. In both parts of the country domestic discontent, or much of it at least, was deflected upon objects away from home, on the other side of Mason and Dixon’s line. The point to be made here, however, is that, though Calhoun did his part in creating a sectional patriotism in the South, he persisted in hoping it would be impossible for labor and capital to achieve a similar unity in the North. Eventually, he thought, the harassed men of business would be only too glad to meet the plantation leaders on the latter’s terms.

After Calhoun’s death some of the apologists for a solid, proslavery South went much farther than he had gone. Jefferson Davis, horrified at the spread of strikes throughout the free world, made more explicit the parallel between abolitionism and socialism as twin attacks upon property. George Fitzhugh took a very different but even more extreme stand. In his *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, published at Richmond in 1854, he admitted the accuracy and justice of the socialist case against capitalism but asserted that the socialists overlooked the need for a master at the head of each of their ideal communities—a need which the Southern plantation system, or something like it, alone could meet.

Fitzhugh praised slavery as the only workable form of socialism and urged the whole world to adopt it, at once, as the sole cure for class conflict and the other ills of competitive society! The proslavery propagandists were firm believers in what was later to be known as the *Führerprinzip*, at least in so far as it could be applied to local affairs.

But it is the spirit of Calhoun, not that of his more forthright followers, which lives on. It is a spirit that may be about to materialize in new and startling forms. Now, if ever, is the time for right-wing Republicans to join with Bourbon Democrats in the sort of reactionary alliance that Calhoun envisaged. The shibboleths of these allies will be not Nullification, indeed, but certainly State Rights; not the Four Freedoms exactly, but Liberty with the connotations it had for Calhoun and for the American Liberty League. The real objects of their attack will be the social controls which liberals will seek to maintain in the interests of world peace, and the democratic aspirations which have been let slip with the cry of havoc but which cannot be chained up again with the dogs of war. The leaders of the new movement will no doubt point with pride to Thomas Jefferson. But the Sage of Monticello is not their man. Let them look, instead, to the political metaphysician of South Carolina, John C. Calhoun.