

Will America Prove Marx Right?

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# Will America Prove Marx Right?

By PETER VIERECK

Not magnitude, not lavishness,  
But Form—the site;  
Not innovating wilfulness,  
But reverence for the Archetype. . . .

The spider in the laurel spins,  
The weed exiles the flower:  
And, flung to kiln, Apollo's bust  
Makes lime for Mammon's tower.

—Herman Melville, great American conservative, on traditional values versus the nihilistic materialism of Economic Man.

THE DISCREDITING of the Soviet fraud has made it a lot easier for intellectuals to become American traditionalists without being howled down as “reactionaries,” “flag wavers,” or “fascists.” Recognition of the blood-stained nature of the Soviet banner makes it seem less deliciously clever to trample on the American banner at every possible occasion. This swing from the outworn poses of revolt is releasing a burst of creative new thinking: an idealistic new conservatism.

But the same change brings new dangers as well as new blessings. In time the new traditionalism may degenerate into a new whitewash of pretentious philosophy for what has always been unpretentious: the old robber-baronism of public-be-damned. At least those endearingly unshaved and candid old pirates did not try to be smoothie “philosophers” of “conservatism.” Genuine giants of our dinosaur era of chaotic expansion, like crusty Commodore Vanderbilt, swashbuckling Dan Drew carelessly trailing seminaries and suicides, or old J. P. Morgan, would have puffed their black cigars scornfully at such fancy nonsense.

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The present essay is taken from a book *Shame and Glory of the Intellectuals* to be published this fall by Beacon Press. PETER VIERECK's last appearance in the *Review* was his controversial “Liberals and Conservatives, 1789-1951” (Winter, 1951).

If this whitewash takes place, then the American flag, rightly saved from the muddy boots of fellow-traveler liberals, might be saved in vain. Or is it a patriotic triumph if the dawn's early glare reveals our flag progressing from being a door mat to being a fig leaf?

Such patriots, reaping unjustified fruits from our justified revolution against communism, now have their grand opportunity. They can now suddenly seem the Great Oaks of the American Dream instead of the parasitic vines. History itself seems beckoning us toward their comforting shade, those stalwart "uncommunistic" pillars both of profit system and of God-fearingness.

But what if there be a contradiction between these two supposedly equal pillars? What if the essence of the patriotic American tradition, along with the tradition of the whole Christian-Hellenic Judaic world, is an awareness of the conflict between our profits and our prophets?

Under various terminologies, in various eras, the contradiction between these alternatives has already been remarked by feudal aristocrats and theologians, by democratic Christian socialists, and by capitalist Tory radicals, but let it here be remarked once more. The average Christian reads the Bible as infrequently as the Marxist reads *Das Kapital*. Otherwise he would note more often that his good book is one long tract against the economic motive, with no more special dispensation for Standard Oil of New Jersey than for Marx:

Lay not up for yourself treasures upon earth, where moth and dust doth corrupt . . . for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. . . . No man can serve two masters . . . ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you: take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body more than raiment?<sup>1</sup>

When the not-so-new conservatives talk vaguely about restoring "one-hundred-per-cent free enterprise" and abolishing "all that New Deal legislation," they may or may not be partly right. That depends on what they mean specifically. Not one of them would think of specifically demanding abolition of such cushionings of the capitalist system as federal deposit insurance, SEC, old age pensions, or the laws (long antedating That Man) against child labor. These laws are accepted almost unanimously by Americans of both parties, including most businessmen.

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<sup>1</sup>Sermon on the Mount, St. Matthew, Chapter 6.

In fact, the able modern American businessman has a lot more sense than some of his spokesmen. One of his most promising organs is the CED (Committee for Economic Development).

Here is another example of businessmen having better sense and deeper devotion to human rights than those who over-zealously "defend" them. Most businessmen are refusing to back the attempts being made to put pressure against academic freedom by bullying teachers of economics and by tying too many strings to financial gifts. Most business alumni in the best universities well understand academic freedom and intellectual integrity; they are simply not interested in using their power to stifle it, any more than most liberal intellectuals are interested in guillotining businessmen and "expropriating the expropriators." This shows that the undoubted gap between "the business crowd" and "the university crowd" can still be bridged, provided both sides follow the logic of the American situation—instead of drawing false analogies with Europe's 1789 and 1917 traditions of class war.

Despite a truckload of pamphlets in every day's mail, America's right-wing promoters of class war fail to arouse those good-natured burghers of America (Marx's hated "bourgeoisie") whom they are trying to talk into becoming a *Herrenvolk*. This happy fact does not prevent such promoters from causing mischief in certain limited sectors, just as America's left-wing promoters of class war—though failing to arouse the mass response they pant for—can cause mischief under certain conditions in their limited sectors.

The program of unlimited free enterprise and unlimited anti-statism, if taken literally, means again letting little children work to death in factories instead of letting them go to public school. Since no spokesman of free enterprise intends this to happen, he cannot literally or fully intend "restoration of free enterprise" and abolition of government meddling. Therefore, he will help his own cause and will clarify all political debate if he states that he does not mean his program literally and fully but only figuratively and partly. So doing, he will not lose votes to New Dealers; he will show himself to the independent voters as a better fellow than he seemed to be.

He will get accused of me-too-ism. Splendid. In a democracy the alternative to civil war is a solid foundation of me-too-ism behind both major parties. This is to the interest of both of them, of both left and right.

Or do the honorable gentlemen of rhetoric prefer to me-too-ism a convulsion of fanatic civil strife, at a moment when only Moscow would benefit? A responsible anticommunist Republican ought to put first stress on reconciling the inevitable diversities in the anticommunist camp. He should avoid inflaming and inciting against his fellow anticommunists; he should save his flames against the actual communists and neutralists. In the presidency and also in the press, America needs not the divider but the healer.

If this gets called “fake Republicanism”—the creed of such folks as the oldest registered Republican voters of New Hampshire—and if McCarthy and the all too genuine Chicago *Tribune* are the only “real” Republicans in America, then long live “that fake Republican, Eisenhower”! For in that case, almost the entire population of America is “fake” and out of step; then all America is “un-American.”

Since no free enterpriser of the out-party would or could abolish federal deposit insurance, SEC, old age pensions, laws against child labor, and the rest, is it not wiser to stop denouncing them unspecifically? Indeed there is no desire to abolish them on the part of our more statesman-like business leaders. The latter are what C. Wright Mills calls—and unnecessarily distrusts as—the “sophisticated conservatives of *Fortune* magazine” in his stimulating book, *The White Collar*.

No New Deal conspiracy was needed to make Americans cushion their capitalism with social security laws. If there was any conspiracy, it was one that occurred nineteen centuries ago in Bethlehem. In our ideals we happen to be a Christian nation, not a nation of capitalist or Marxist materialism.

## II

Europe’s social democrats, except for untypical traitors like the procommunist Nenni in Italy, are usually democrats first and socialists second. In the same way, American businessmen and British conservatives are usually democrats first and capitalists second. This gives both groups common democratic, anticommunist ideals for which to cooperate, as well as serious disagreement over the extent of statism.

That Europe’s various social democrats and labor parties should still mouth their blends of half-understood Hegel and *Vulgarmarxism* is repellent. It shows the intellectual bankruptcy of the left as a whole. It shows it is time for the left to evolve further away from economic statism and to evolve into a more conservative rediscovery

of noneconomic values. But it does not make our anticommunist allies of the European left the "socialistic twins of communism."

If the mild social reforms of these European anticommunists are too "socialistic" for any American Adam Smith, then so are those of the welfare-minded Tories and arch-conservatives of England. In that case, our American Adam Smith may as well swallow his qualms and be glad to settle for as little so-called socialism as that; the only foreseeable European alternative is more, not less. Or else he may refuse to swallow his qualms. Instead, he has the privilege of cutting off American economic and military aid from all anticommunist European governments, whether conservative, Catholic Christian Democrat, or Social Democrat. Go right ahead; in that case, the American Adam Smith will produce Cain and Abel Smith in Europe, a fratricidal destruction of the free world for Stalin's benefit.

Our relatively nonstatist and individualist system of economics (call it our mixed-economy or our reformed capitalism) is not a goal in itself. It is subjected to the goals of ethics and humanity. The Soviet statist system of economics (call it Stalinist fascism or totalitarian socialism) is the goal in itself. It is unlimited by ethics and humanity. This ethical distinction between the two systems is more important than the economic distinctions. It makes us the hope of the world for millions, including democratic socialists and European trade unionists as well as democratic capitalists. These millions of allies may not share our faith in our American system of economics (owing to their different local and historical circumstances). But they do share our faith in humanity and freedom.

Suppose we now proclaim the profit system as an absolute goal in itself? Suppose we repudiate, as an allegedly "socialistic half-way house towards communism," any limiting of the profit system by demands of ethics and humanity? Such is the program of many groups known as traditionalists. But it never was the American tradition. It was hardly the spirit of Valley Forge. Our Constitution contains no clause exalting the profit system as the only system in our complex, nonsocialist, mixed economy. The apologetics of the William Graham Summer school of capitalism are no old or deep-rooted part of the American tradition, being rather a product of the relatively recent, post-Civil-War gilded age.

On May 17, 1915, Woodrow Wilson formulated one of America's most basic and sacred traditions, which ought to animate conserva-

tives as much as liberals: "The interesting and inspiring thought about America is that she asks nothing for herself except what she has a right to ask for humanity itself." A merely economic "conservatism," sacrificing to short-run profits the American dedication to humanity, drives young people to Marxism and other radical programs by libeling all moderate democratic reforming of capitalism as "Marxist":

We have plenty of "conservatism" in contemporary America in the sense of defense of the *status quo*, private enterprise, and "constitutionalism." If my experience is typical, teachers receive a ton of such propagandistic print for every ounce of so-called "liberal" literature. It has a common emphasis upon "liberty," but it has—as Reinhold Niebuhr has well said in a trenchant article in *The Yale Review* of March 1951—about the same relationship to classical liberalism as Herbert Hoover's book entitled *The Challenge to Liberty* has to John Stuart Mill's book, *On Liberty*. In this literature, "freedom" has become an ideological façade, behind which a certain type of economic vested interest seeks to preserve its "liberty" against a more broadly based political power; and this type of conservatism is primarily concerned with establishing the stereotype in the public mind that the most effective methods which democracies have developed to refute Marxist prophecies of doom, are themselves a malignant malady of free society. Politically and intellectually incompetent, they even confuse Keynes and Marx, and drive youth to more extreme positions since accommodation and adjustment are precluded. It is characteristic that their position has become so ossified that vigorous intellectual restatements of the economic possibility of using political power to restore competitive controls—such as Henry C. Simon's *Economic Policy for a Free Society* and David McCord Wright's *Democracy and Progress and Capitalism*—are rejected as "socialistic," a position that would on further analysis lead to sticking the same label on Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, or Woodrow Wilson.<sup>2</sup>

### III

I have faith in American capitalism because I believe its profit system has been sufficiently modified by ethics, or else can be made so, and because I believe it can continue to be revised peacefully, without need of socialism, when it does violate the demands of humanity. Defending it on this basis, we can create faith in our system abroad and at home. Only so can we "frustrate the knavish tricks, confound the politics" of the Kremlin and its Western "neutralists." But if we

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<sup>2</sup>Gideonse, Harry D., speech on "Education in a Period of National Preparedness"; delivered at the Sixteenth Educational Conference of the American Council on Education, meeting in New York, November 1 and 2, 1951.

adopt the un-American principle of putting profits above humanity, we shall discredit American capitalism and aid Moscow.

Most of us agree on the need of refuting the ideological challenge of Marxism and overcoming the military challenge of the Red army. We differ on how to go about this refutation. If we do it by exalting the profit system over our great American and Christian traditions of humanity and if we do this in the name of "Americanism" and of anti-Marxism, there will be two results, one abroad and one at home. Abroad we will find ourselves fatally without allies, a fate not displeasing to some of the "go-it-alone" isolationists. Secondly, and more ironically, we will at home be *behaving exactly as Marxism says we behave*: namely, putting our capitalist profit motive over all religious, ethical, and cultural ties. By combatting Marxism in the wrong way, we would for the first time in our history become Marxist economic determinists in our behavior.

Can anything happen that would justify Marx even in democratic America? Though he was steeped in enough western humanism to make him far preferable to the Soviet terror, his Hegelianism and Prussian statism produced a doctrinaire pedant whose historical determinism is almost impossible to justify. Here is the unique achievement of our Old Guardians: their triumph would accomplish the dazzling feat of justifying the following passage of Marx and Engels, which our past history has gloriously disproved:

The bourgeoisie has played an extremely revolutionary role. . . . It has destroyed all feudal, patriarchal, and idyllic relationships. It has ruthlessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound men to their "natural superiors"; it has left no other bond betwixt man and man but crude self-interest and unfeeling "cash payment." It has drowned religious ecstasy, chivalrous enthusiasm, and humdrum sentimentalism in the ice-water of selfish calculation. It has degraded personal dignity to the level of exchange value; and in place of countless dearly-bought chartered freedoms, it has set up one solitary unscrupulous freedom—freedom of trade.

The triumph of cash-nexus thinking in America would sacrifice everything that artistic magic and psychological science have learned since the psychologically unenlightened "enlightenment" of the eighteenth century, the unimaginative economic physiocrats and the too narrowly rational rationalists. This New Shallowness would shut our eyes again to the fact that man is a human being; that is to say, he needs organic social unities transcending profit motives, wage motives, and the incomplete freedom of free enterprise.



Capitalism is not a religion nor, when separated from Christian ethics, a humanly acceptable credo or way of life. The current ambitious attempt to make it one is being incorrectly denounced as "fascism" by New Deal liberals and incorrectly hailed as "free individualism" by Republican conservatives. It is neither. It is a return to that Sahara of inhuman aridity: the belief in Economic Man. It is a return to the incomplete liberties—merely top-of-the-iceberg—of private economic liberty. It ignores the nine-tenths of human liberties beneath the top of the brain: the nine-tenths of imagination and art and religion.

After the deeper, post-eighteenth-century insights into how society really holds together (de Tocqueville, Coleridge, Leo XIII, Dostoyevsky, Freud), the new stress on property rights and profit motive is such a bore that it becomes downright exciting. Nothing is more "sensational" for the public than dullness squared, followed by exclamation marks. Hence, the fuss stirred up by all the neo-capitalist books and articles. Some are scholarly and able. Some are demagogic. But all are parching our needed conservatism into a new Sahara.

Fortunately American capitalism and American capitalists are better than that. It is a slander to indict the Double-Breasted Business Suit politically, by equating it with the fascist or imperialist uniform, as do so many distrustful leftist intellectuals. Aesthetically the business suit may still be harmful to our culture, in the sense that all exaggerated utilitarian attitudes are. And never dismiss aesthetic considerations as minor. But politically the expert in the business suit is indispensable to freedom. He was indispensable in the war against fascism and is again indispensable in the cold war against communism. Both are also production-wars. Fascism was defeated in World War II by the industrial production-miracles of that capitalism which, according to the Marxists, fights only on fascism's side.

Despite our valid cultural criticisms, American capitalism is an amply justified necessity. Not for its own sake but for freedom's sake. Its productivity, with its two consequences of high living-standards at home and defense against aggressors abroad, is of service to freedom. That's justification enough, and let's leave it at that. Let us not make a *mystique* of the business suit as self-justified, as more than serviceable, or as incarnating innate "American" values superior to the rest of the American community.

The American capitalist is morally entitled to derive material

profits from freedom because of his usefulness to freedom. But never because of any automatic divine laws of Adam Smith. Never because his free enterprise is the only kind of freedom. What is merely useful, rather than innately good, must never be regarded as sacred, beyond criticism, beyond future change.

Once again today, the whole free world depends on the production and skills of the American capitalist. This gives him a good case for arguing that he needs relief from taxes and needs increased "incentives." A good case but not a unique case. The skilled laborers of the trade unions and of the farms are also needed and also require incentives (wages, price controls, subsidies). That line of reasoning, by motivating only through financial "incentives," will soon have everybody clamoring equally in a war of all against all.

The most important nexus, holding together a free society, is not cash but free ideals. Saving our skins and our liberties, first from the Nazis and now from the Soviets, should be an "incentive" more basic than either war profits or war wages. Freedom, like beauty, is first of all its own excuse for being. And then, if it is real freedom and not just paper freedom, all the rest—all the indispensable economic gains—follow after.

In order to create a cooperation of all with all, America needs more understanding of the Soviet threat, of our stake overseas, and of that sweetness of liberty which (as Matteoti said before his murder by Mussolini) no nation appreciates till the noose is round its neck.