

# Introduction

## FROM CRISES TO HOPE

Ralph Summy

**As we move into the last decade of this century and set the stage for the 21st, there are a few faint signs that amidst various impending crises of catastrophic proportions, humankind is groping its way towards an age of maturity. Out of crisis — as the Chinese indicate in their dual meaning of the word — arises opportunity.**

### The Left's Despair

Such an interpretation of hope, with its guarded optimism, stands in marked contrast to the pall of heavy pessimism that descended over much of the Left only a few years ago and still permeates its more traditional wing. 'The Left' (if I may lump under that banner all those who are striving for a more compassionate and cooperative society for whatever reason) had seen its former spearhead, the working class, begin to wither away (rather than the state) and even be routed as in the case of the British miners. The Left faced (and still does) seemingly intractable foes in the form of global capitalism's transnational corporations and mobile money markets; its faith in marxism-leninism, which justified all manner of sacrifices in the name of the future classless society, proved to be manifestly unwarranted in the case of the Soviet experiment. As well, the social democratic parties, around the world, were abandoning any pretence they might once have had for ushering in socialism by representative democracy.

Moreover, if the Left was running out of a future, the present state of the world reflected an even gloomier picture. The superpowers were running amuck in an arms race to Armageddon; the mass of fragile human beings in the Third World were submerged under mountains of poverty; debts were accumulating for the benefit of the rich elites in both the Third and First Worlds, to be serviced and reduced (if possible) by the sacrifices of the poor.

Perhaps most depressing of all, a particularly virulent strand of capitalism was gaining ascendancy. Called 'the New Right', it represented at best a revival of classical economic

theory (whose 19th century consequences were none too sanguine for the greater part of humanity) and at worst the arrival of neo-fascism. Its dominant values were built around unbridled individualism. It focussed on excessive materialism, made a virtue out of greed (as eloquently proclaimed by Michael Douglas in the film *Wall Street*), equated strength with militarisation, and decried the bureaucratic controls of the state while seeking to mould everyone to its concept of morality. It preached personal sacrifice and patriotism, distrusted foreigners, blamed the poor for their poverty, called the unemployed 'dole bludgers', added feminists to its list of 'noisy and immoral minorities', prescribed state violence as the panacea for social violence, denounced corruption while applauding the 'smart deal', and opted for fashion and appearance over substantive human needs. To get rid of the violence in the world, one simply had to eliminate all the communists and drug dealers and, of course, introduce the free enterprise system. To put right the private life of narcissism, one simply retreated to the psychiatric couch, the encounter session, or the charismatic church.

The catalogue of positions and attitudes — all antithetical to the Left's vision of a humane society — is endless. But mainly the New Right grovelled in money, worshipped status, catered to image-building, and revelled in unsated consumption. Its ruling norm was 'to do unto the other guy before he(sic) does it to you'. For the Left, this rising tide of New Right 'barbarism' was challenging civilisation itself. The Old Right had been bad enough. Yet at this time of crises, the left was bereft of new ideas — particularly new strategies to counter the various threats. What had always sus-

tained the Left — i.e. its hope — had now virtually disappeared.

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### Two Dimensions of Social Change

Hope is only one of two basic ingredients needed to galvanise people into radical action. The other is awareness of the problem. Most of the above catalogue of problems continue to be well-recognised today. The list, of course, could include many more concerns such as environmental destruction, tourist exploitation, gender inequality, racism, Australia's rising militarism<sup>1</sup>, domestic violence, rising crime rates, and so forth. Nonetheless, despite the length of the list, in my view there is cause for some optimism in that people's awareness of the problems is growing and, perhaps more important, they are increasingly coming to realise the systemic linkages. It seems to me people are more open-minded, prepared to challenge orthodox premises, and to transmit their ideas through a radically new mode of politics. (More about this later).

But first, *Social Alternatives* over the past twelve years has sought to play a role in heightening social consciousness — both of the problems and the interconnections. In many ways analysing society's problems is much easier than proposing possible solutions and constructing strategies for change. Social scientists are quite adept at critical analysis, especially those in academe, and many of this journal's contributors work in the universities. Hence not surprisingly,

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despite the journal's title and proclaimed aim, there has tended to be an undue percentage of articles analysing the shortcomings of our society and a minimum of pieces suggesting ways to improve our lot. Whilst analysis of the oppressive structures and problems are important components of the awareness process, too much depiction of unrelieved gloom, without rectifying measures of hope, can spell paralysis and eventually the death knell of a movement.

This is certainly what afflicted the Left. It was bereft of hope; it lacked, as it had once experienced, a belief in its salvation — that eventually it would win through. Traditionally, it had subscribed to the view that either the ideal world would be constructed from voluntarist actions and rational planning or it would result from having history or God on the side of the oppressed. (In this sense Marxists and Christians have always shared an eschatological vision.) Leftist theorists and pragmatists, however, have, since about 1970 (the theorists earlier), been less grandiose in their predictions. Radical socialists have constructed and debated complex, often very arid, social theories to explain the pervasive and enduring nature of modern capitalism. Their lugubrious findings have added to the Left's malaise. The sense of hopelessness that permeates that whole theoretical school associated with Althusser and Poulantzas has had a particularly deadening effect on left vitality and intellectual inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Radical social theory has been reduced to the confines of intellectuals writing in esoteric journals to each other about the bleak prospects of socialism. If that depiction sounds overly harsh, ask yourself how many of today's political activists have ever heard of Foucault, Althusser or Anderson. Contrast this predicament with the situation that existed in former years when socialism was a vibrant creed.

Despite not being able to communicate outside their own ranks, this new genre of socialist intellectuals **does** offer some highly important socio-economic insights. How to make them digestible, though, and generate hope out of a message that is basically bleak? The problem is compounded by the personal behaviour displayed by so many of these intellectuals. Not only have they generally remained aloof

from any radical agencies of change, but they have acted as paragon examples of the role they assign the professional class in their writings. Ironically they are "reproducing capitalist social relations". They are helping to fashion the network of social control mechanisms that keep the commodity producer or worker in a state of constant 'false consciousness' and powerlessness. Like the state apparatus, their function is to contain and mould labour in accordance with capitalism's dictates. Why they do this may have more to do with individual choice than the imperatives of a predisposed role. It is true if they step too far out of line, get involved in system threatening radical politics, there are discreet ways to curb a promising professional career. But there are equally discreet ways the individual can counter any baneful measures, especially in the relative freedom of the academic environment. In all probability, I suspect many Australian 'house marxists' choose contemplative isolation and eschew radical action, not because they lack courage but because they find the life of pure intellectuality stimulating. However, learning entirely divorced from the 'real world' tends to produce sterile scholarship.

David Biggins, in his article "Professionals and the Labour Movement", tackles this question of the professional's role. "All workers", he maintains, "professional and non-professional, have a common interest in building a just, moral and sustainable society." He sees areas where professionals can share their skills and knowledge with labour and operate "in certain ways fundamentally antagonistic to capital". In the process they will enhance the quality of their research. He draws on his own experiences in occupational health to lay down some guidelines, and points to principles that the trade union movement has recommended in order to realise worker/professional cooperation towards progressive ends. His alternatives offer some hope without minimising the difficulties.

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#### **The "New Politics"**

Whilst the traditional radical left

has run out of steam, the leadership of the moderate democratic socialists has succumbed to the blandishments of power and even forgone its original objective. Labour party stalwarts in most of the western democracies have not only **lost** hope; they have **chosen** hopelessness. They have given up completely on transforming capitalism to socialism, if not in their rhetoric certainly by their policies and actions. In reality they are engaged in staving off the existing system's worst inhumanities while confirming every day the paradigm and structures that create those abuses. Of course, many labour party leaders and certain trade union plutocrats do quite well in the power and money game for themselves.

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Since the social democrats and their rough equivalent in the United States, the Democratic party, were unable to come up with progressive policies — trapped as they were in a basically two-party-preferred electoral system and steeped in careerism — an educated and concerned electorate across the traditional spectrum has moved into a new sphere of politics. The "essence of the 'new politics', as Chris Rootes notes in his article, "is the expansive desire to participate and to put matters of principle ahead of material concerns." To register their concerns and realise the necessary changes, people have created the 'new social movements'. What precise form the political participation takes, Rootes argues, "will be determined largely by the constellation of obstacles and opportunities, both structural and historically contingent, which prevails in (a particular) country at a given time." He then gives examples. Ultimately, however, he holds to the view that the political parties will still be functioning at the end of the 'new politics' pipeline.

Brian Martin, on the other hand, cautions against the dangers of becoming involved in elections in any form. He mounts a strong case. His position is not endorsed by Drew Hutton, who argues for the limited role a Green Party **can** constructively perform. In the end, I think the Greens will play the electoral game (as they have done so

already, including Hutton on at least three occasions), but they would do well to constantly bear in mind the pitfalls Martin has outlined, and which they would have to overcome.

### Some Political Alternatives

Martin does not belong to that popular school of social scientists who indulge solely in criticising the existing system and policies. His article also proposes different ways of doing things, including experimentation with an interesting participatory system called 'demarchy'.

The modern concept of 'demarchy' was first formulated by John Burnheim, who contributes an article in this issue, "Democracy by Statistical Representation", explicating some of the strengths and difficulties of his proposal. A theoretical framework is given to 'demarchy' in Jane Mansbridge's reflective piece on "Democracy and Common Interests". Her compelling argument is based on the need, wherever possible, to move away from forms of political activity she labels 'adversary democracy' to forms that come under the heading of 'deliberative democracy'. The former type of democracy which prevails in western democracies — and has done so since mid-seventeenth century — is predicated on the assumption of conflicting citizen interests. One can readily see how his political assumption coincides with the notion of capitalism's competing economic units. Long before the conflict model of 'adversary democracy', however, democracy was conceived in terms of deliberation. Citizens, it was assumed, had common interests; they could reason together "until they came up with a good policy that met their needs". As Mansbridge explains about the citizens of 'deliberative democracy':

They may also delegate some of their number, with whom they have common interests, to deliberate for them. They expect to make their decisions by consensus.

The implication of a re-orientation to 'deliberative democracy', as a means of tackling our multifarious crises, is decidedly worth exploring. As Mansbridge suggests, moving towards a sense of common purpose and agreement on a universal scale is less likely, if at all, to occur when based on a theory that "counts each individual for one and none for more than one".

Since there are some "matters of genuine and irreconcilable conflict", it is necessary to experiment with political structures and processes that accommodate a mix of 'adversary' and 'deliberative democracy'. The focus, though, should be on the deliberative end of the scale, since at the present time most of the world's societies are weighted towards adversarial politics. Western nations even boast of the legacy of 'adversary democracy' they left behind in their former colonies.

The articles of Ned Crosby, John Burnheim, Brian Martin, and Anurag Ratna outline alternative structures that fit into the mould of 'deliberative democracy'. I was particularly intrigued by Crosby's concept of policy and electoral juries. His structures are not confined to the drawing board of a theorist, but have been put, on "several" occasions and "with considerable success", into operation at the Jefferson Center in Minneapolis, U.S.A. Readers should also find the structures proposed by Burnheim to introduce "genuine representation" through "statistical representation" both fascinating and provocative. Hopefully, this issue of *Social Alternatives* will elicit a number of comments for the 'Dialogue & Debate' section.

Many readers might not be familiar with the ideas of structural change that come under the rubric of post Gandhian constructive work. Best expressed in the programme of the sarvodaya movement under its two great leaders, Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan, it offers an alternative participatory model of development for Third World people (and those of the First World ghettos) to the one imposed by the West and local elites. The sarvodaya movement is not a 'talking shop'; many of its ideas have been tested and carried out successfully in the face of enormous obstacles. Anurag Ratna provides a brief review of "Sarvodaya Democracy" in his article of the same name.

The Bob James' piece highlights the need and the ways to guard against hierarchical tendencies in social movement organisations. Otherwise, what he calls the "old politics" (another word for 'adversary democracy' and just plain 'adversarial annihilation') will be resumed and the same policy issues will have to be rethought again and again and again. In

his view, "the process by which people try changing the world is more important than whether they achieve a particular blueprint... Indeed... process is the blueprint".

For James, the process entails coming face to face with conflict in a truthful way. His suggestion: "we need to encourage, indeed celebrate conflict, not suppress it, in order to learn to deal creatively and non-violently with it."

Such practices, I contend, are part of the third sphere of politics — or the 'new politics' — that people throughout the world are attempting to define today.

### Third Sphere of Politics

Another word for the 'third sphere' is 'nonviolent action'. This type of politics lies sandwiched between the conventional sphere of politics (parliament, party system, courts, lobbying, etc) and the violent sphere of politics (war, coup d'état, terrorism, rioting, etc). People have been using the non-violent sphere since recorded history, but never (as far as we know) to the extent it has been used in the 20th century and especially in the second half. During the last decade nonviolent politics has gained exceptionally wide acceptance.

The reasons are not difficult to comprehend. People have not suddenly become 'moral' or nonviolent. Whether the issue has been peace, conservation, ecology, women's rights, ethnic survival, economic justice, political suppression or the denial of some other fundamental right, people have recognised the crises yet realised the futility of going 'up the right channel' or taking up the gun. This latter course might provide a fine temporary outlet for expressive politics, but cathartic relief is no substitute for tangible achievement. Moreover, we humans are not naturally violent creatures<sup>3</sup> and some of us even have qualms about so-called "justified violence". Since the opponent's preponderance of firepower, in any case, closes off the violent option, most people have looked to the conventional sphere, only to find that its rules and procedures favour the privileged and the status quo. Radical changes — some may even demand a shift in paradigmatic thinking — are doomed unless more open and participatory forms of conducting politics are explored. And the methods of non-

violent political action have appeared ideally suited.<sup>4</sup>

In the process of conducting politics in the third sphere people are also discovering that "nonviolent sanctions play a significant role in determining the political condition of the society as a whole". The prospects of creating a society with the capacity to foster freedom, democracy and social justice and to meet diverse human needs appear to be greatly enhanced.<sup>5</sup> Governments, ranging all the way from those in Eastern Europe to the Philippines to Australia, have had to respond to people's needs. Whilst the demands are being met in many instances, the danger is that the structures and processes created by the people will somehow be incorporated into the conventional sphere and therefore come under elite control. As well, there is always the possibility of nonviolent leaders being co-opted into the old system.

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Neither is the prospect of an extremely violent response on the part of the opponent to be discounted. In this issue, Gene Sharp, doyen of nonviolent scholars, and his researcher,

Bruce Jenkins, analyse the pro-democracy campaign conducted in China last May and June. They were on the spot in Beijing and compiled a careful study — probably the best strategic analysis of what went wrong. Nonviolent struggle does not always succeed (nor does violent struggle) but certain strategic principles, if adhered to, do increase the chances of success. There is certainly an urgent need for scholars, in conjunction with activists, to inquire more deeply into this new mode of conducting politics.

Since the time of English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, Western politics has been explicitly articulated and acted upon according to a dichotomy of two political spheres. Hobbes depicted the state of nature and the civil state. In the former sphere, where life in his classic phrase is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short", violence prevails. Therefore human beings have contracted out of such chaos into a system of governmental order. This civil state, however, with its conventional sphere of politics, has created structures and processes incapable of meeting the crises of the modern world and fulfilling human needs. Indeed, many of the crises are caused by the civil state itself.

Hobbes and his successors have ignored the possibilities of political participation that exist in the third

sphere of nonviolence. The good news for the revival of the Left is that the people are opening up this domain. One can hope again!

#### References or Notes

1. This frightening new level of militarism under Defence Minister Beazley is spelled out clearly in a forthcoming book, Graeme Cheeseman and St John Kettle (eds), **The New Australian Militarism**, Pluto, Sydney, March 1990.
2. See Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, **Reading Capital** (trans. Ben Brewster from *Lire le Capital*, 1968), New Left Books, London, 1970; and Nicos Poulantzas, **Political Power and Social Classes** (trans. Timothy O'Hagan from *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales*, 1968), New Left Books, London, 1973.
3. Perhaps the most definitive and concise statement on this long-running debate as to whether homo sapiens is phylogenetically programmed to be violent is contained in the "Document: The Seville Statement on Violence", **Alternatives**, XII, 2, April 1987, pp. 271-4. The eminent group of scientists who compiled the statement concluded "that biology does not condemn humanity to war... The same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace."
4. The scholar most prominent in articulating the theory and dynamics of nonviolence has been Gene Sharp. See his **The Politics of Non-violent Action**, Porter Sargent Publisher, Boston, 1973. Also his **Social Power and Political Freedom**, Extending Horizons Books, Boston, 1980; and **Making Europe Unconquerable**, Taylor and Francis, Ltd., London, 1985. These books can be purchased at the University of Queensland Bookshop. Research and publications in the field of nonviolent politics has expanded greatly since Sharp's classic work of 1973.
5. Sharp, **Social Power and Political Freedom**, pp. 348-56.

### THREE SPHERES OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY

*In the concrete situation these three spheres of political action will tend to overlap. Thus a nonviolent action may degenerate into violence, to a greater or lesser degree. And a parliamentary action may pass into the realm of nonviolence; or an action may be conducted at both levels simultaneously. Action may even operate at all three levels.*

