

The Nation and “socialism”

David Walsh
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For examples of intellectual and political bankruptcy, one could hardly do better than peruse the pages of the *Nation*, the American liberal publication. An excellent starting-point would be the magazine's ongoing series, "Reimagining Socialism."

The collection of short essays by a variety of liberal and "left" commentators in the US, is a response to the breakdown of world capitalism and the discrediting of free market ideology, a phenomenon that even the mass media acknowledges. Popular hatred for the corporate-financial aristocracy is increasingly a fact of American daily life.

The *Nation's* response is a pre-emptive effort to convince its readers that socialist revolution is impossible and the best of all possible worlds would be the emergence of mass reformist pressure on the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

The series prompted a sardonic comment this week in Britain's *Financial Times*, one of the more astute voices of bourgeois opinion. Columnist Michael Skapinker ("Dangers in a World of Disillusionment," March 30) notes that "Oddly, those who should be rejoicing most at capitalism's humbling are as lost as everyone else." He observes that the *Nation* "has now published an extensive series of essays called 'Reimagining Socialism,' in which one writer after another admits they cannot reimagine socialism."

Beginning with the introductory essay by Barbara Ehrenreich of the reformist Democratic Socialists of America and Bill Fletcher Jr., former assistant to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and co-founder of "Progressives for Obama," the different contributions strike a dispirited and half-hearted note.

Ehrenreich and Fletcher, after deriding the number of socialists in America ("there aren't enough of us to make an audible crowing sound"), argue that the present economic and social order may not provide the necessary basis for a higher form of social organization.

Astonishingly, they suggest that "capitalism may be leaving us with less than it found on this planet, about 400 years ago, when the capitalist mode of production began to take off." The fact that the co-authors are posting their thoughts on the Internet, a means of communication not widely known in the year explorer Henry Hudson sailed into what is now New York harbor, doesn't seem to faze them.

From this ahistorical, misanthropic stance, the pair proceed to the following question and remarkable answer (which the *Financial Times* rightly cites as evidence of the *Nation's* bewilderment): "In this situation, with both long-term biological and day-to-day economic survival in doubt, the only relevant question is: do we have a plan, people? ... Let's just put it right out on the table: we don't."

Further on, making their political perspective clear, Ehrenreich and Fletcher advocate resurrecting solidarity, an "antique notion" which "flickered into life again in the symbolism and energy of the Obama campaign."

The other contributors so far have ranged from the greatly confused (sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein and urban theorist Mike Davis) to the truly swinish and politically dubious (ex-leftist Tariq Ali).

The majority of the pieces make little mention of socialism at all. As Skapinker in the *Financial Times* points out, "Rebecca Solnit, another essayist, suggests 'gardens and childcare co-ops and bicycle lanes and farmers' markets,' but these are projects, not a programme. Several mention the importance of moving to an economy less dependent on fossil fuels, but you hardly have to be an anti-capitalist these days to believe in that."

The *Nation's* editors, in a series supposedly dedicated to rethinking socialism, manage to include self-confessed skeptics about the very idea of socialism.

Environmentalist Bill McKibben admits, "I'm not

sure I'm much of a socialist." Economics professor Robert Pollin argues that "it is unrealistic in my view to expect it [socialism] to take shape today." The aforementioned Solnit tells us that the "underlying vision is neither state socialist nor corporate capitalist, but something humane, local and accountable." Saskia Sassen of the *Huffington Post* finds the plan for "a post-capitalist society... almost an impossibility."

The majority of the contributors are social reformists of one stripe or another who would probably share the view of *Left Business Observer* editor Doug Henwood that the goal is "a more civilized welfare state." Likewise, journalist Christian Parenti sarcastically notes that the specter haunting present society "is not capitalism's revolutionary *Götterdämmerung*, just the ghost of mild-mannered Eduard Bernstein, father of evolutionary, reform socialism."

The most "left" of the essayists look to the "social movements challenging the neoliberal order" (Tariq Ali) in South America, i.e., the various left-talking bourgeois regimes in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay. In passing, it should be noted that Ali, a former leader of the pseudo-Trotskyist United Secretariat, proposes allowing the US auto and airlines industries to go bust, a process that would devastate the lives of millions, "so that a public transportation infrastructure can be built based on an ecologically sound and more efficient train service."

No one among the *Nation* contributors criticizes Obama, no one suggests a break with the Democratic Party. No one offers a serious analysis of the present global economic crisis. Nor does anyone address critical historical issues that would presumably be involved in 'reimagining socialism': the fate of the Russian Revolution, the rise of Stalinism, the nature of the Chinese and Eastern European regimes, nationalism versus internationalism in the socialist movement, etc.

The *Nation* speaks to and for a definite social and political milieu: ex-leftists, ex-Stalinists, ex-reformers, who are consistent in only one thing—their lack of genuine political independence from the American establishment. There is about the magazine the stench of cynicism, cowardice and unseriousness.

The publication's masthead proudly proclaims "since 1865." In fact, the *Nation* has a deplorable history. It was founded as a bourgeois publication, the voice of American liberalism. The publication was deeply

hostile to the emergence of the socialist labor movement, denounced the Paris Commune and advocated the execution of the Haymarket anarchists. From 1881 to 1918 the magazine vegetated as an insert or a weekly supplement to the *New York Evening Post*, its "progressivism" exhausting itself in the Woodrow Wilson administration.

Like American liberalism as a whole, the *Nation* was thoroughly unprepared for the Great Depression, and, lacking an independent program of its own, clung for dear life in the 1930s to the Communist Party and the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR. Under the editorship of Freda Kirchwey, the *Nation* infamously defended the Moscow Trials and the innumerable crimes of Stalinism, declaring in August 1936: "There can be no doubt that dictatorship in Russia is dying and that a new democracy is slowly being born."

The magazine will never live down the role it played in the 1930s and the *Nation*'s most enduring claim to fame will be that it generated this characterization of its role by Leon Trotsky ("The Priests of Half-Truth," 1938): "Their philosophy reflects their own world. By their social nature they are intellectual semi-bourgeois. They feed upon half-thoughts and half-feelings. They wish to cure society by half-measures. Regarding the historical process as too unstable a phenomenon, they refuse to engage themselves more than fifty percent. Thus, these people, living by half-truths, that is to say, the worst sort of falsehood, have become a genuine brake upon truly progressive, i.e., revolutionary thought."

And, one might add, it has only been downhill since Trotsky's characterization seven decades ago!

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