

Radicalism in the tradition of nineteenth century America

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Radicalism is the advocacy of imposing one's will on society because of the gradual alienation from class life style and the value it offers. The radical purposes of struggle are to change the system and to give power to the people who have no economic or political control. In this context radicalism is based on both the feeling of being personally responsible for affecting change and the perception of society to be run by a "power elite" of economic and social interests that are oblivious to implementing society's creedal values. But beyond the scope of this general definition, the term "radicalism" is of imprecise and doubtful usage in the United States of America and its reprobation is seemingly enforced by the American mind whose nature antagonizes the term's perennial involvement in the American tradition. To get the problem in its right perspective, a practical confirmation to this ambiguity is deemed necessary and can be strengthened by the deep analytical study of reform and radicalism in nineteenth century America.

There is a large number of American politicians who could be labeled "radical"; and the true illustration can be limited to two of these. The first became President and the second very nearly did so. Within the limits of this subject among the most significant presidential elections that occurred between 1812 and the beginning of the twentieth century - with an exception to Abraham Lincoln's case in 1860 - this paper will take into account the elections of 1828 and 1896. These two samples symbolized, if not embodied, more than a substitution of one set of men for another. The obviously spontaneous uprising of public opinion was the motivating aspect that contributed to making each of these elections a conflict of a positively exaggerated significance; and the consequence of each was a reinforcement of American democracy both in spirit and in action. In fact it was through this process that American "radicalism" was reflected on each occasion because it expressed a national mood.

Before exposing in detail the close connection between the two concerned political figures, namely, Andrew Jackson and William Jennings Bryan, and the considerable presence of radicalism in the thought of each of them, it may be suggested that there were other politicians who could be assigned to the category of "radical". The Jacksonians of the

1830's and "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman (1), South Carolina's demagogue, who denounced President Grover Cleveland as a Judas who thrice betrayed the democracy," (2) belonged to this section. Without exceeding the level of localism they tended to be minor not major "radical" heroes. Though there were American radicals by the score, such as the Populist movement of the 1890s, there is no uninterrupted and coherent radical tradition at the level of national politics. The most celebrated category to whom the term "radical" is customarily applied is that Republican faction in Congress which was the leading voice of the legislative process of Reconstruction after the Civil War.

The main reason for the absence of a strong radical tradition in American national politics is the success of the American Revolution. According to the American mind, America is a nation of a peculiar type whose principle is a total dedication to and a sincere concern with freedom. All men are free, but only in the United States do they remain free. This belief is stressed by James Monroe's famous phrase in 1823 that men have 'enjoyed unexampled felicity,' (3) and the American Constitution is the unique political instrument that preserves this freedom. In such conditions there is only very limited scope for a real radicalism. To be labeled a radical with a capital "R" is to be considered a critic of that sacred American birthright. It may be also observed that the parallel absence of strong conservative tradition with a national appeal is itself a powerful factor in checking the growth of a radical tradition. Men of extreme right are the only genuine rebels in America.

Though the frontier has nothing so formidable to assail as wholly favorable to the development of radicalism as might be supposed is somewhat contradictory. Certainly the frontier bred radicals from Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln downwards, and to some degree strongly stimulated the development of the radical mind. Yet the frontier, by its nature, could not easily help create a coherent and organized radical movement; its small farmers were too individualistic and extremely scattered, too liable to be swept by violent and short-lived enthusiasms, and eventually too closely tied to local and personal needs. Moreover, these aspects represented a means of escape from the economic and social pressures of the towns of the East and probably it did at least as much to weaken urban radicalism as to enforce its rural counterpart. Conclusively there was no American radical party; no continuing radical group in Congress, still any tradition. Instead there was a deep American belief in the common man, with its accompanying hostility to monopoly and privilege far more widespread even if far more effective if it could be organized. It was the essence of Jeffersonianism, the source of the American dream; and

its periodic revival and vigor in the nineteenth century was American radicalism. It was in its roots profoundly agrarian.

The Jacksonian "Revolution" of the 1830s won most of its support from small farmers. The local radicalism so common in the Middle-West after the Civil War period was typically agrarian. In 1896 William Jennings Bryan was deeply agrarian too. It was therefore individualist believing in *laissez faire*, suspicious of government control. In economic terms its greatest need was cheap money and a plentiful currency, and it voluntarily opted for condemning the exploiting bankers and vulgar financiers of the East. However, it never opposed capitalism from which it openly and confidently shaped its lasting objectives whose main principle was to save this system from itself. For agrarianism in nineteenth century America must not be interpreted in terms narrowly agricultural; the merchant upon whom rural communities so heavily depended, was himself one of the central figures of the agrarian "myth". The enemies were rather in Jackson's day, Nicholas Biddle, the President of the Bank of the United States (BUS), and at the end of the century, those whom Bryan called "the moneyed interests, aggregated wealth and capital, imperious, arrogant, compassionless." (4)

The weakness of this agrarian and entrepreneurial radicalism was to be shown when it came to grips with the problem presented by the growth of American industry in the second half of the nineteenth century. With more evidence, by the 1830s Jacksonianism could embrace the wage-earners. But two generations later the problem of economic democracy had assumed a totally different form. It was predominantly an urban problem and its solution was vital to the survival of political democracy. It is obvious that the radical answer to this problem would be utterly conservative. Many of the Populists did little more than long for the idyll of the 1830s. Bryan was involved in such a problem and there was a slightly pathetic ring about the resolution which he put before the Democratic Party Convention at Baltimore, Maryland, in 1912 apparently assuring that 'the Party of Jefferson and Jackson is still the champion of popular government and equality before the law.' (5)

It was out of the West that there came the President with the most obvious claim to be called a radical. This was Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, who was inaugurated in 1829 and served for two terms. Jackson was too strong a personality to represent a movement. His background and career, the circumstances of his election, and the uses he made of power help to illustrate the nature and limitations of radicalism in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s. Later historians agreed upon his success, observing that 'like Lincoln and the other great American Presidents he grew to his task during the Tenure of office. Something of his achievement rested upon his

magnificent bearing and upon the simple dignity which contrasted so sharply with the gloomy anticipation of his opponents and which no later President has equaled,' (6) and because his achievement rested also upon his identification of himself with the people, this identification was itself his greatest claim to be a radical. Jackson believed in the common man, and thus, his policy was basically one of *laissez faire*. He had no wish to increase the power of the Federal Government and still less readiness to lend its support to privileged groups. Above all his prolonged battle with the BUS was the one issue over which Jackson proceeded to extremes. In 1832 he fought the elections on the bank issue by removing funds from the bank and thus killed it by 1833. (7)

As a measure of economic policy Jackson's political approach was disastrous and unwise because of the destruction of the BUS and the transfer of government deposits to state banks stimulated inflation and consequently led to the panic of 1837. (8) This was a fatal blow to his successor, Martin Van Buren. Yet, Andrew Jackson was the first effective interpreter of Jeffersonianism to eastern working-men in society which was still predominantly agrarian. His radicalism was a traditional American belief expressed in action at a time when it appeared that monopoly and privilege were threatening to deprive the common man of his birthright. Andrew Jackson's achievement was the newly stirring substance to the American dream.

The emergence of William Jennings Bryan as the unforgotten defeated hero of the 1896 election (9) occurred in the America of Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Samuel Gompers, and Henry Demarest Lloyd who were unforgotten men too (10) because of their considerable impact on an urban and industrial society which turned to be a magnet force to immigrants for the purpose of preserving its image of land of freedom. It is logically inconceivable to juxtapose for the sake of comparison men who have been president and those who have not. Yet the case of William Jennings Bryan who was defeated three times would have been an exception to the rule. Behind him lay the great force of American agrarianism. He was the Populist candidate for the presidency as well as the nominee of the Democratic Party; and Populism was in a sense the last great challenging bastion of rural America. Bryan identified himself with Populism because of its many roots, and its practical support in the early 90s came from numerous sources. Behind it lay a generation of widespread and varied local radicalism, tough, individualistic, and vigorous, notably in the Middle-West, which had found expression in movements like the Granges, with their attack on the railroad monopolists, and the Greenbackers, with their cry for an expanded currency. (11) In general terms it was part of the frontier inheritance, stimulated by the cheap land available under the Homestead Act

and from the railroads. From the outset it was a protest, though bred at the local level, in terms that referred to Jacksonianism. There was the same belief in the common man, the same ferocious opposition to monopolists and the privileged, the same bitter complaint that government was on the side of these groups. 'We have petitioned, and our petition have been scorned; we have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded; we have begged and they have mocked when our calamity came. We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. WE DEFY THEM.'(12) William Jennings Bryan, the perfection of American type, a son of the West, and a believer in America and in the Bible (13) became the crusading prophet who clearly explained the dramatic Populist's economic situation and his attitude towards those who caused it. Moreover, like the Populists, Bryan was convinced that the answer of 1828 was the solution for 1896. Once again it was a deeply conservative radicalism.

Bryan's radicalism was an old-fashioned type, defending equality and continuing to ask that government should not promote privilege. The wide gap existing between Jackson and Bryan, notably when the former was a man of actions and the latter a man of words, there appeared Bryan's single-minded enthusiasm and his devotion to causes which he believed good. To the more complex problems of an industrial society, his inherited Jacksonian attitude offered no tangible answer. When he exposed his need for "an Andrew Jackson to stand, as Jackson stood, against the encroachment of organized wealth, (14) he was in a harmonious agreement with Western farmer and Eastern working-man alike; but his proclamation in "you come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard, we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country..."(15) was a clear overstatement to the role of agrarianism in the United States in the 1890s.

The defeat of Bryan in the election of 1896 seemed a major collapse to idealism and radicalism. But it was a setback rather than a catastrophe for radicalism because the movement William Jennings Bryan adopted was "at its best, deeply idealist and humanitarian, blending the traditional agrarian myth at its noblest with that sense of the urgency of social reform which was soon to animate the Progressive movement." (16) Two developments more than offset the defeat of Bryan. The first of these was the rapid spread of Progressivism during the later nineties and the beginning of the twentieth century. This movement was the work of various forces and was shaped by a great number of men among whom there was no typical status, background, religion, or education. But at a deeper level they were "conservatives and restorationists. They picked up the promise of American life where their

eighteenth-century forebears had dropped it." (17) Progressivism was bred in the certainty of powerful climate to reform. It was an age of Lincoln Steffens; Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Thorstein Veblen, and Edward Bellamy who, as reformers, devoted themselves to the abolition of the existing abuses. The movement's impulse, based on the abuse of trusts, bosses, or adulterated food, was often a moral one. The second development was the succession of Theodore Roosevelt to the Presidency when McKinley tragically disappeared in 1901. Though there was little that was radical about him because he was a man of the right, not were his achievements as reformer considerable, his final services to radicalism were to oppose William H. Taft and to get himself adopted as a Progressive candidate for the Presidency in 1912, thus opening the way to the victory of Woodrow Wilson, the intellectual among American Presidents, (18) whose most interesting characteristic he had in him was that elusive mixture of high moral purpose and power to respond to change in a modern democratic state.

There was a traditional flavor about the way the American people voted in 1916. For it was largely the old radical alliance of West and South that backed Wilson. The narrow verdict of 1916 was to be the last national victory of radicalism until the Great Depression of the 1930s swept Franklin Delano Roosevelt into power in circumstances that made a radical policy inevitable. (19) Like the events of Andrew Jackson's time, the developments of Wilson's Presidency demonstrated that radicalism in the American tradition cannot be understood if it is looked on merely as the continuing political activity of a spirited group.

There is no radical "type" because American radicalism may select as its shrewd representative an opponent of evolution, a college principal, or a slave-owning duelist. Radicalism in America reflects a spectrum from which the extreme colors are excluded. Woodrow Wilson perfectly summarized American radicalism's aim, spirit, and methods in a conclusive statement: 'Our thought has been "let every man look out for himself, let every generation look out for itself," while we reared giant machinery which made it impossible that any but those who stood at the levers of control should have a chance to look out for themselves. We had not forgotten our morals. We remembered well enough that we had set up policy which was meant to serve the humblest as well as the most powerful, with an eye single to the standards of justice and fair play, and remembered it with pride. But we were very heedless and in hurry to be great. We have come now to the sober second thought. The scales of heedlessness have fallen from our eyes. We have made up our minds to square every process of our national life again with the standards we so proudly set up at the beginning

and have always carried at our hearts. Our work is a work of restoration.'(20)

In theory, all Americans are born radicals; in practice, the evidence of the years 1814 to 1901 suggests that a surprisingly large number of them are radicals -at irregular intervals- depending on the periodic upsurge of democracy. In such circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that American radicalism has been traditional and conservative; finding its inspiration in the grass roots and its economic justification in private property; ceaselessly opposing monopoly and privilege and government as their supreme example.

Bibliography

- (1) "Pitchfork" is a nickname of Ben Tillman . He took it through his own statement: "He [Grover Cleveland] is an old bag of beef, and I am going to Washington with a pitchfork and prod him in his fat ribs."
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- (5) Glad, Paul, *The Trumpet Soundeth: William Jennings Bryan and his Democracy*, (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co) 1964, p89.
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- (14) Ibid, p94.
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- (19) _____, *The Progressive Era*, p201.
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