

## *Socialist Blues*

**Decade of Decision: The Crisis of the American System**, by Michael Harrington, *New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980. 354 pp. \$11.95.*

SINCE *The Other America* appeared in 1962 Professor Michael Harrington has been issuing periodic reports on the possibilities of socialism in America. While his books always have the same theme, his mood seems to vary with the times. In the tentative early '60's it was plaintive: "How long shall we look the other way while our fellow human beings suffer? How long?" In the Aquarian mid-'60's Harrington's *The Accidental Century* (1965) was confident: America might be standing "on the eve of its fulfillment." In the post-Watergate *Twilight of Capitalism* (1976) the tone became belligerent and apocalyptic: America has entered the "contradictory,

crisis-prone, last stage of capitalism," and in this final struggle "the spirit of the new Karl Marx must be our comrade."

Here we are in the 1980's and capitalism, as crisis-prone as ever, seems to be holding on and even breathing a new air of legitimacy supplied by some of its former critics. Harrington is still waiting for Godot, but now a new, uncharacteristic tone has crept into his writings: sourness. In his latest book, *Decade of Decision*, Harrington continues to insist that America suffers from irreparable "structural" flaws, and yet —Harrington comes to this conclusion most reluctantly—so powerful are the "myths" and "illusions" of capitalism that the American people don't seem ready for socialism. "The very existence of systemic unfairness" ought to be enough to make them demand an egalitarian system, but "that, alas, is a leftist fairy tale." There are a lot of "alases" in this book. He quotes Alice Rivlin, formerly of the Brookings In-

stitution, as noting that American parents have a perverse way of accepting income differentials and hoping that their children make it into the top groups. "Alas, my own sense of American society corroborates Rivlin's point." What can a socialist *do* with such people? He can, as Harrington suggests here and there in the book, "demystify" capitalism, but Harrington has been doing that for years without success. If anything, he seems to be losing influence and patronage, which he acknowledges forthrightly and ruefully. "Writers, as well I know," used to be "rewarded for pointing out what was wrong with America," but now it is the conservatives and lapsed liberals who "earn the gratitude of the powers that be."

Harrington has not yet abandoned hope, and his book contains a scattering of proposals for nudging us closer to socialism. He suggests putting workers on corporate and pension fund boards, forcing banks to invest in marginal neighborhoods and adopt minimum quotas for loans to women and "minorities," increasing inheritance taxes, forcing corporations to answer to new government agencies before they can relocate their factories, making the rich pay higher taxes and giving the money to the poor in a federalized welfare system, and so on. Some of these proposals may be innocuous, some are almost certainly mischievous, but none merits discussion here, for Harrington himself hardly discusses them. Some get a page or two of exposition, others a few paragraphs. His heart doesn't seem to be in them, and the reason is obvious. He knows just how familiar they all are. What he says of his urban proposals might apply to the others as well: "Almost all of them are already part of the program of the democratic Left and have been so for a long time. Too long a time."

The weariness of this book is the price it pays for its lack of introspection. For the most part Harrington seems unaware that Americans are turning their backs on the programs of his "democratic Left" because they know that those programs always end by creating swarms of new bureaucrats of

very doubtful fidelity to the purpose of their programs. The most convincing parts of Harrington's book are those showing the corruption of government agencies set up to regulate business and manage the economy. Yet Harrington proposes as a solution more agencies of various kinds, more power in the hands of elites who will of course *claim* to speak for "the public." Not until the last page of the book does Harrington take account of socialism's own "structural" contradiction. He observes that George Wallace created his populist constituency out of Americans who regarded government as a distant "them," a corps of technocrats contemptuous of ordinary people. Harrington concedes that Wallace was on to something. He twisted the truth, "but there was a truth there." Very well, "what, then, should one do?" Unfortunately, Harrington has exactly two paragraphs left to answer the question, so of course he doesn't answer it. Instead, there is a little uplifting rhetoric about "a transformation of the social and economic conditions of the planet," followed by the hope that "bewildered America" may yet come to its senses and accept his programs for "the elimination of poverty and racism at home and the possibility of eliminating it [*sic*] around the globe, decent health and respect for the environment, disarmament and the participation of the people in the decisions that shape their lives, and all the rest." The goals are as familiar as his methods for achieving them. When it has reached the point where he can finish off the litany with "and all the rest," then we know that there is weariness here, too.

No one can possibly guess what Harrington will write after this book. He knows, too well, that America "is psychologically individualistic, more so than any other advanced country," but he cannot bring himself to consider that this intractable individualism might be a good touchstone for testing the grand schemes of reformers. Consequently, there seems to be no place else for Harrington to go, and nothing else to say. He has exhausted his store of ideas and, from what can be gathered in *Decade of Decision*, gotten

himself into a bad mood. The best restorative would be a long hiatus of silence, humility, and self-doubt—a decade, perhaps, or at least a few years, of hesitation.

Reviewed by GEORGE MCKENNA