

Democracy for the Few. By Michael Parenti. (New York: St. Martin's, 1974, 1977, 1980). References in the text are to the 1980 edition unless otherwise noted.

Michael Parenti's *Democracy for the Few* (1974, 1977, 1980) is one of the more recent examples of an interesting genre of books: grotesque radical caricature of the American political system. In each edition, the work is basically an explication of the Marxist critique of capitalist politics—featuring powerful, ruthless, and, of course, unjust economic elite dominance in every sphere of society and polity. The theme of every chapter may be fairly described as "How to rip off the masses, control them, and make it look good." *Democracy for the Few* uses certain familiar devices employed in the work of other social critics. It features, for instance, the "harrowing case study" or production of particular instances which are implicitly offered as characteristic of a whole process, institution, or, indeed, "the system." It seems to live up to the Marxian notion that the task of philosophy (in this case, scholarship, presumably) is not to describe the world but to change it. It uses all sorts of glaring distortions, omissions, and artful insinuations.¹

Still, Parenti's work represents perhaps the worst of the "elite domination" books. Ironically, it takes the form of an undergraduate text in American politics—suitably adapted to all the standard topics covered in college courses. Unlike some other authors with analogous concerns—for example C. Wright Mills and G. William Domhoff—Parenti approaches his subject very much like a propagandist. His presentation of the American political system and the allegedly dominant business elite has much in common with Nazi presentations of the Jews. In one respect, it might be characterized as an artful use of parts to falsify the whole. In another respect, the descriptions, examples, and illustrations appear overwhelmingly intended to arouse hatred and revulsion toward the

1. Among the more intriguing assertions by Parenti, we find one to the effect that mass killings by Khmer Rouge in Cambodia never did occur (p. 173), that Soviet Union's military build-up has been occurring, or occurred, "almost entirely on its China border" (p. 82), that economic systems employing worker-self management have proved very productive (p. 320). Obviously, Parenti has not followed closely the development of the Yugoslav economy.

objects attacked. It is as if Parenti were describing not a fairly stable social and political system but rather a sudden man-made calamity requiring immediate rescue effort. Here, we must let the author speak for himself:

In sum, the history of the great "affluence" in the United States since World War II is of people becoming increasingly entrapped....Millions live under starvation conditions....Millions live in crowded, dilapidated, poorly ventilated, ill-heated and hazardous domiciles.... Millions who identify themselves as middle class live in overpriced, poorly constructed, heavily mortgaged homes or high-rent apartments that consume a large part of their incomes while providing living quarters that are far from satisfactory....(p. 32)

...In areas like Detroit, hunger has reached epidemic proportions. Of that city's 1.5 million people, 200,000 are starving, according to the mayor's office... (p. 24, 1977)

...Unemployed workers have resorted to selling their blood in order to feed their families... (p. 28)

...An unemployed father of five in Georgia offered to sell an eye or a kidney for \$10,000...(p. 26, 1977; p. 28, 1980)

... At least 250,000 to 300,000 children, predominantly, but not exclusively from low-income families, are tortured, maimed and brutalized by adults each year... (p. 29)

...The person who steals \$5 is called a thief, while the person who steals \$5 million is called a financier...(p. 141, 1977)

...The police are like an occupying army patrolling the exploited and hostile low-income areas... (p. 143, 1977)

...Lawlessness is endemic to the business community... (p. 129, 1977)

...Congressmen pilfer from the public treasure...(p. 232)

...Far from defending freedom, the United States government has been propagating fascist regimes throughout the world...(p. 93, 1977; p. ' 2, 1980)

...almost all the social institutions and material resources...in this society are controlled by...people who are accountable to no one but themselves...(p. 35)

...Police, judges, FBI and CIA agents, surveillance technicians, psychosurgeons, drug-pushing school authorities, prison guards and the attendants in mental institutions all have one thing in common: they work to make the world safe for those on top by exercising arbitrary power over those

below-all in the name of peace and security, normality and well being, law and order... (p. 166)

...Presiding over all this are the privileged few who control the enormous corporate wealth of the society who have more money than they know what to do with and who enjoy all the advantages of power and position that come with wealth... (p. 31, 1977)

In his chapter on "Law and Order: The Repression of Dissent," Parenti cites this example, typical of his whole presentation of the subject:

Witness this assault on an anti-war protestor in front of the Pentagon in 1967:

At least four times that soldier hit her with all his force, then as she lay covering her head with her arms, thrust his club swordlikebetween her hands onto her face. Two more troops came up and began dragging the girl toward the Pentagon...she twisted her body so we could see her face. But there was no face there: all we saw were some raw skin and blood. We couldn't even see if she was crying-her eyes had filled with the blood pouring down her head. She vomited, and that too was blood. Then they rushed her away....(p. 144, 1977)

On how the legal system works, Mr. Parenti offers us this striking vignette:

William Wesler, a husky 6'1" white man, repeatedly terrorized and molested the children of a young Indian woman, Yvonne Wanrow, and the children of a woman who lived next door to Wanrow. Wesler had a record of sexually abusing children and had recently raped a neighbor's seven-year-old daughter. Despite frantic and repeated calls to the police, he was never arrested. Then one night, Yvonne Wanrow killed Wesler when he broke into the house and made sexual advances upon her and her three-year-old nephew. She was convicted and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison...(p. 139, 1977)

We may now move from style to substance....Parenti's discussion of taxes ("The Unequal Burden," pp. 97-101, 1977), illustrates a propagandist-like war on truth characteristic of his whole enterprise. Says Parenti:

The steeply progressive federal tax rates on income give the misleading appearance that the rich are taxed more heavily than the poor. In reality, the wealthier the person, the greater are his opportunities (Note the interesting transition...) to enjoy non-taxable income from capital gains, expense accounts, tax-free municipal and state bonds, stock options and various other kinds of business and professional deductions. (pp. 97-98)

What follows is a listing of how many millionaires (35) paid no income tax at all in 1964, and how many did not pay anything in 1970 (112). Then we have a discussion of how little had been paid by J. Paul Getty and H.L. Hunt, and we move onto the regressivity of property taxes, the politicization of the IRS, and how little is being paid in taxes by the big corporations; end of chapter. What the reader is not told-granted that it is always better to be rich than poor, and granted that the tax system is quite imperfect-is what people actually do pay to the federal government on their "adjusted gross incomes." And here it turns out that in 1978, for example, people with incomes under 10,000 dollars a year paid between 9.4 and 0.4 percent of taxable income to the federal government; people making between 50,000 and 100,000 dollars paid 30.3 percent; people making in excess of 1 million dollars paid 61.6 percent. The latter figure was based on 1,694 returns.

From 1960 to 1977, the year in which Mr. Parenti's second edition was published, the changes in actual tax collections have followed much the same pattern. In fact, the change over time has been more favorable to lower income groups. E.g., in 1960, people with taxable incomes under \$5,000 paid 19.9 percent in federal income taxes but by 1977 only 4.4 percent; people under \$10,000 moved down from 20.4 to 8.6 percent; those under \$15,000 from 21.4 to 11.8 percent. On the other hand, persons with taxable incomes of over \$500,000 increased their contributions slightly from 59.0 to 59.2 percent, and those with over one million had their contributions reduced from 65.4 to 61.6 percent of such incomes (U.S. *Statistical Abstract*, 1980 Table 451, p. 270). Now, the idea of progressivity in federal taxation may never have worked in a truly pristine fashion, but the student of American government presumably deserves to know that it's more than just a word, or mere deception, as Parenti's treatment implies.

If Parenti had tried to put the American tax system into some kind of comparative perspective, he would have been forced to an uncomfortable conclusion. The privileges of wealth in America are considerably more modest than in *most* other countries of the world where private persons can own what Marx would term "the means of production and distribution."

So far as the so-called socialist or communist countries are concerned, the situation there is indeed different. Private individuals do not own large landed estates, huge farms, factories, banks,

railroads, chain stores, or trucking companies. But that is not to say that hierarchy, authority, power, and inequality are abolished. Quite the contrary. We need hardly remind Mr. Parenti of Milovan Djilas' *New Class*. It is arguable that the Central Committee of the CPSU, and on a daily basis its Politburo headed by the General Secretary, have a far more monolithic grip on the Soviet economy and on the lives of the ordinary citizens than any comparable group of 25 or even 250 Americans. All this is implicit even in the views of C. Wright Mills, Domhoff, *et al.* After all, these gentlemen are arguing capitalist elite power by such largely indirect mechanisms as common interests, common backgrounds, common values, reinforced by occupational and informal social contacts.²

Ruling Communist Parties possess much more rigorously articulated leadership structures. The rulers are members of programmatic, organized, institutionally interacting groups, and certainly not squeamish about claims to total direction of their society (as in Article 6 of the USSR Constitution of 1977). It would be instructive to see Mr. Parenti compare J. Edgar Hoover-style police repression in the United States with the rather more massive, one might say, methods of Henry Yagoda, Nikolai Yezhov, and Lavrenti Beria; or even with those of post-1947 Yugoslav Communists.

According to Parenti, political elites in the United States suppress "harmful thoughts" and "deprive us of the opportunity of hearing and debating revolutionary advocates, and try to make up our minds for us. An exchange is forbidden because the advocate has been silenced." (p. 292-293). One wonders whether Parenti regards his own book as just another "defense of the established order," but, in any case, the charge he is making is not relative or partial, but

2. This is how C. Wright Mills defines the power elite:

The conception of the power elite and of its unity rests upon the corresponding developments and the coincidence of interests among economic, political and military organizations. It also rests upon the similarity of origin and outlook, and the social and personal intermingling of the top circles from each of these dominant hierarchies. This conjunction of institutional and psychological forces, in turn, is revealed by the heavy personnel traffic within and between the big three institutional orders, as well as by the rise of go-betweens as in the high-level lobbying. The conception of the power elite, accordingly, does *not* rest upon the assumption that American history since the origins of World War II must be understood as a secret plot, or as a great coordinated conspiracy of the members of this elite. The conception rests upon quite impersonal grounds." *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 292.

total. "Exchange is forbidden," we are told. But where in the world has there been, and is there, more open discussion and exchange of ideas than in the U.S.? Can books as critical of the socio-political *status quo* as those of Mills, Marcuse, Domhoff, Lundberg, Kolko, Parenti, *et al.*, be found in the public libraries of the Communist states? Could they be used as texts and assigned materials in courses offered at the universities of those states? Would they be tolerated on best-seller lists? Surely, Mr. Parenti would not suggest that most military regimes of either Latin America or Africa would sanction these sorts of things. So perhaps if we had looked at the matter more closely we would find that the allegedly repressed freedom to debate in the United States, however flawed and different in many details, is *comparable* only to that enjoyed in a handful of world states, mostly in Scandinavia and Western Europe.

In all fairness to Parenti, he "disavows" the Soviet model-in one obscure footnote of the book (p. 320, fn. 25). But in view of all the negative things he says about capitalist power and domination, his own vision of the "goal society" is profoundly disturbing.

Parenti says that it is "a debatable point whether socialist, communist and other radical revolutionaries are dedicated to the destruction of freedom. Most revolutionaries would argue that freedom is one of the things lacking in the *present* society." Parenti may well be right on the first point, and he is certainly right on the second. It seems that almost everybody is in favor of freedom, at least as a word, or an attractive concept. But what do people mean by it?

If Parenti's statement of the "revolutionary argument" about freedom is his own, it is rather disquieting. He says:

Admittedly some freedoms enjoyed today would be lost in a revolutionary society-for instance, the freedom to exploit other people and get rich from their labor, the freedom to squander human and natural resources and treat the environment as a septic tank, the freedom to monopolize information and use technical and professional skills primarily for personal gain and the freedom to exercise unaccountable power. (p. 293)

And he goes on to say that

in many countries (?) throughout the world successful social revolutionary movements have brought a net (?) increase in the freedom of individuals, revolutionaries point out, by advancing the conditions necessary for the preservation of health and human life, by providing jobs and education for the

unemployed and illiterate, by using economic resources for social development rather than corporate profit and by overthrowing reactionary repressive regimes and ending foreign exploitation and involving large sectors of the populace in the task of socialist reconstruction. Revolutions have extended a number of real freedoms without destroying those that never existed for the common people. (p. 293)

Here we have the wonderfully transparent Utopian-authoritarian prescription which implicitly guides the book's social criticism. It is easy enough to see that a state could restrict, if not completely deny, private individuals the right to hire other individuals to do work for them. But how would we ensure that the "state," and/or its agencies, would not "exploit" people? The members of Poland's "Solidarity," after all, do not feel exploited by private corporations but by the state. Is this so only because the Polish Communist state, like the Soviet, is badly flawed or "misshapen," in Parenti's terms? The implication of Parenti's position is that if the collective, community-wide power of a society (we need not call it a "state") be somehow properly established (or "liberated"), individuals would not be exploited. Just as presumably nobody would ever "squander" human and natural resources and "treat the environment as a septic tank."

But whence comes this marvellous faith in the masses and in "everyman?" From empirical observation which has shown us how corporate moguls have littered the streets and highways of America with bottles, beer cans and all sorts of objects? Or how they have all secretly left their boardrooms to deface the walls of our schools, monuments, buildings, and subways? What evidence is there that any revolution would make people cease "using personal skills primarily for personal gain?" Perhaps a bio-surgical revolution, not a social political one, would be capable of making the historically known mankind into something not as yet known. In the background of Parenti's vision is an authoritarian political power (traditional to leftist-radical thought), acting on behalf of the collectivity to insure the "right" freedoms for the individual. That power would also decide the precise "net" balance of freedom. And as Parenti says, it would not have to worry about freedoms which "never existed for the common people."

If one took Parenti's social criticism seriously, this would mean that a dictatorship denying all freedom of expression, belief, and association would be justifiable in the United States because we

haven't had it-meaningfully-anyway. Curiously enough, one could even justify Nazi, Fascist, and militarist dictatorships as well as the Stalinist kind on Parenti's foundations: jobs, order, participation, education, all are certainly quite compatible with several of these, as is planning "on behalf of the whole society," not just somebody's private profit. (Practically speaking, the difference between public planners and private entrepreneurs is not necessarily the difference between public and private welfare. Goering and Stalin were "public planners.") What Parenti seems to mean by "freedom" is unclear. The autonomy of the individual from public authority (however organized) does not seem to weigh heavily with him.

In the three editions of *Democracy for the Few*, there are so many grotesque misrepresentations that a careful and detailed review of them would doubtless require nothing short of a "counterbook." This essay is concerned with two much more limited propositions. The first of these is certain "sleight-of-hand" devices employed by Parenti to achieve plausibility for his arguments. The second is an exploration of the apparent relevance and appeal of this book (and others like it) notwithstanding all the most obvious defects.

Apart from what may be termed simple misrepresentations, the critical defect and simultaneously subterfuge, of the Parenti interpretation is absence of any empirical-comparative context. The image of rectitude in the background of Parenti's book is Utopia. But without a real-world frame of reference, the meaning and value to be attached to many descriptions and contrasts offered by Parenti and other social critics simply cannot be determined. Without it, the best may be presented as the worst; the most virtuous as the most vile; the largest as the smallest; the oldest as the youngest; and thus *ad infinitum*. For example, who is to say that men who are six-feet-two are "tall," or "short?" If one looks for data on average height of men on the United States, and compares, the answer may be "tall." In a camp assembling all our professional basketball players, the answer would probably be "short." The answer would be different depending on whether such men lived among the Pygmies or the Zulus. The implicit assumption of the Parenti critique is that inequality and hierarchy are inherently and self-evidently bad, and assuming them to be bad, Parenti shows that they exist in the United States. Thence he concludes with what seems a powerful moral indictment of the American system.

But, if Parenti put the problems of inequality, dominance, and poverty into a genuinely comparative perspective, the answers would be different. While there are many, potentially infinite, kinds of indicators that one might use, extensive comparative analysis would douse the fire of radical indignation. Historically, the condition of oligarchy has been universal, at least so far as nation-states are concerned. Yet, granted that inequality, poverty, exploitation, hierarchy, and "clusters of influence" are world-wide phenomena, some societies have experienced more of them and some have experienced less.

Any comparatively oriented study would show the United States to be among the better-off societies of the world. Indeed, such inquiry might even give support to certain popular notions of the "freest," "richest," and "best." For example, no society in the world has had as large a proportion of its youth in schools and institutions of higher education as had the United States in the last several decades. No other society has had so favorable a pattern of consumption whether in food, durable goods, housing or services. Few societies have excelled the United States in mortality and morbidity achievements. While there is poverty in America, even that is relative to the generally unprecedented average standard of living. Very few Americans are known to have died of starvation or medically certified malnutrition in the last forty years or so. The distribution of incomes in the United States, contrary to the implications of Parenti's exposition, has compared quite favorably with many socialist and social-democratic regimes, including that of Sweden, and indeed most nations of the world. If we have been ruled by totalitarian corporate monsters, they have apparently treated us with kindness. They have also "tolerated," it would seem, an unbelievable degree of freedom even to the point of allowing the publication and widespread circulation of such scathingly critical works as those of Messrs. Parenti, Kolko, Domhoff, Lundberg, Marcuse, Mills, and many others (with great personal, private financial profit, it would seem, to some of these radical gentlemen).

Parenti's foray into international comparisons is brief and badly flawed. He says:

The United States has been portrayed as a land of prosperity and well-being. But closer scrutiny brings no great cause for celebration. The life expectancy of American men is lower than in eighteen other countries. The infant mortality rate is worse than in thirteen other nations. In eleven countries women have a

better chance to live through child-birth than in the United States. One out of every five American adults is functionally illiterate. Almost 80 million Americans live in conditions of need on incomes that have been estimated as below minimum adequacy by the Department of Labor. Of these about 26 million are designated as living in acute poverty and want. Of the poor, only 5.4 million get either food stamps or free food. (pp. 22-23)

and

Some Americans believe that those described as "poor" in the United States would be considered fairly well-off in Third World nations. However, the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition discovered in 1968 that in the United States more than 12 million suffer from conditions of malnutrition and hunger comparable to those found in places like Turkey and Pakistan..."(p. 23)

One doctor found serious malnutrition deficiencies in almost half the children from poor families in Texas and Louisiana... (p. 24)

Apart from the issue of reliability of sources, only a few of the above statements involve genuine comparisons among nations. Since there were over 150 sovereign political systems in the world community of the late 70's, to say that the U.S. ranked eleventh or thirteenth in something or other is to say that it was in the top ten percent of the world states. Now, if Mr. Parenti had wished to exert himself a little more in the comparative direction, he would have found scores of major indicators-compiled by the UN, OECD, and many other sources-all testifying to even more impressive achievements of the American economy and society. Parenti deplors hunger in America, and suggests it is more widespread than some would believe, but omits to mention readily available food consumption figures for the U.S. and the world community of nations; or readily available data on the purchasing power of the average wage in the United States as compared with other states; the argument that the U.S. is comparable somehow with Turkey and Pakistan in malnutrition is not merely absurd. The way in which it is framed would surely bring a smile to Dr. Goebbels' face. Naturally, those suffering from malnutrition in the U.S. would be similar to those suffering from it in Turkey or Pakistan; typhus victims in all three countries would be very similar too. The very large difference in the proportion of those afflicted by malnutrition in these societies as compared with the United States seems to escape the author completely. Parenti deplors functional illiteracy in the U.S. but has

nothing to say about it comparatively, and neglects all indicators which would give the reader some comparative sense of the diffusion of communication media, institutions of learning, enrollments, and other presumably significant cultural development indicators.

In setting out distorted standards of poverty and want, Parenti follows in the footsteps of what may be termed a modern radical tradition. Consider, for example, Ferdinand Lundberg's best-seller definition of U.S. poverty in 1968:

Most Americans—citizens of the wealthiest, most powerful and most ideal-swathed country in the world—by a very wide margin own nothing more than their household goods, a few glittering gadgets such as automobiles and television sets (usually purchased on the installment plan, many at second hand), and the clothes on their backs. A horde if not a majority of Americans live in shacks, cabins, hovels, shanties...!

How does this compare with conditions elsewhere? Lundberg avoids the issue with a nonsensical strawman attributed to others:

Conditions abroad, in the standard American view, are *everywhere* far worse than *anywhere* in the United States.*

How does Lundberg define poverty? Even well paid executives may be poor, he says, when they lose their jobs. And even people who keep their jobs may be poor if they face, for example, costly medical emergencies. Somehow, only

the man of property (any amount?) is evidently in a different position. He is definitely not poor. And this is all I say.'

Realistically, of course, how many people in the whole world would *not* be poor very quickly if they lost their jobs and couldn't find new ones? According to Lundberg's definition, 70 percent of Americans in 1968 were poor. He probably should have said 99.0 percent. In fact, elsewhere in the book, Lundberg says that 75 percent of Americans live either "in poverty" or "meagerly."⁶

As for the comparative perspective, Lundberg resorts to

3. *The Rich and the Super Rich* (New York: Bantam, 1969).

4. *Ibid.*, italics mine.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

6. *Ibid.*

something approaching intellectual violence when he says that American educational statistics are impressive when compared "with the data for Basutoland."⁷

In a book published contemporaneously with Parenti's, Karl Deutsch showed that in terms of the distribution of income *before* taxes, the United States had maintained for three decades a very egalitarian position compared with most Western European nations. Using the Gini index of inequality, Deutsch showed the U.S. with a more equitable (i.e., less unequal) income distribution than France, West Germany, Finland, Netherlands, Britain, Sweden, and Denmark in the 1960's, and also for all previous available periods going back to the 1940's and late 1930's.⁸

According to data covering 75 "most populous" nations published by the U.S. Department of Commerce *Statistical Abstract* in 1980 (Table 1575, p. 901), the United States' life expectancy at birth, for both sexes, was exceeded (very narrowly, 75 years to 73.2) by only four nations).

No country in the world exceeded the United States in the diffusion of telephones, radios, and television sets per 1,000 population in a compendium of data for 89 nation states, and covering the years 1975 to 1977. (See Table 1598, p. 922.)

The U.S. percentage of illiterate population in 1980 in a survey of 74 countries was equaled by 12 nations at 0.5 percent but not bettered by any. The proportion of GNP spent on education in the U.S. was higher in only 9 states (Table 1578, pp. 903-904).

According to U.N. data, Americans consumed more newsprint per capita than the nationals of any other country of the world in 1977 based on a survey of 129 nations.⁹

In a list of 46 larger countries, the percentage of U.S. dwellings with water piped inside (97.5 percent in 1970) was marginally exceeded by only four states, Canada, Denmark, West Germany and Sweden.¹⁰ With somewhat more fragmentary information, the United States ranked first in the world in the percentage of dwellings with combined piped water, indoor toilets, and bathtubs-well over 95 percent in each category.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 714.

8. See Karl Deutsch, *Politics and Government: How People Decide Their Fate*, Second Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), Table 5.1, pp. 138-139.

9. See *Statistical Yearbook 1978* (UN: New York, 1978), Table 179, pp. 652-654.

10. *Statistical Abstract*, p. 905, Table 1579.

In light of Parenti's emphasis of American "militarism," it should be noted that in 1978 the average percentage of GNP devoted to military expenditures throughout the world was 5.4, but only 5.1 percent for the United States. In a list of 53 states, the United States was proportionately outspent by 19 countries."

While the United States had more military personnel per 1,000 population (9.6) than, on average, the world at large (6.2), the U.S. figure was exceeded by the USSR with 18.4; the Warsaw Pact exceeded NATO by 16.7 to 8.7; and in a list of 53 states, 20 states exceeded the American proportion.¹²

Parenti's treatment of institutions suffers from the same lack of comparative perspective. Thus, he momentarily informs the reader that:

The great bulk of the American population belongs to occupations and income levels that have no representation in Congress. (p. 245)

What he omits to note is that (a) no legislative body of several hundred members *could* possibly replicate all the occupational divisions and income levels of a multi-million member society; and that (b) there is a very substantial "elite bias" in all the legislative assemblies of the world favoring, among others, the more educated, professionally skilled, and also usually more often male and middle class persons. In 1970, 69 percent of all Britons questioned in a public opinion poll identified themselves as belonging to the working class.¹³ But fewer than 13 percent of the members of the House of Commons were occupationally classified as "workers."¹⁴ Or consider the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union with approximately 1,500 members. More than half of the deputies are generally also members of the Communist Party, while only 7 percent of the population of the USSR belongs to the Party. Women accounted for more than half of the Soviet population in the 1970's but only about a third of

11. *Ibid.*, p. 924, Table 1599.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 925, Table 1600.

13. See R.W. Johnson, "The British Political Elite, 1955-1972," *Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*, Vol. 14, 1973, pp. 41 ff.; and Robert J. Lieber in A. Groth, R. Lieber and N. Lieber, *Contemporary Politics: Europe* (Cambridge: Winthrop, 1976), pp. 62-65.

14. David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), p. 49.

the Supreme Soviet. Fewer than one out of three persons in the Soviet work force was from the intelligentsia, i.e., occupations usually requiring higher education. But more than half of the Supreme Soviet was drawn from that relatively privileged social stratum in the 60's and 70's. The occupational-educational and, for all practical purposes, also, income differences between Soviet society as a whole and the Party's Central Committee—which many would consider the *de facto* legislature of the system—are even sharper and wider.

As shown by Karl Deutsch, in 1970 the Soviet labor force consisted of 51 percent workers; 22.4 percent peasants; 26 percent white-collar workers, and a quarter of one percent party bureaucrats. But 96 percent of the 396 member CPSU Central Committee was composed in 1971 of white-collar workers, and 43 percent of those were Party bureaucrats."

Another important dimension left out of the Parenti critique of the American system is substantially historical. What has been the long-range direction of American society in this century, since the 30's, or the Second World War on many or all of the issues that Parenti *et al.* seem so concerned about? Has there been a trend toward greater inequality? Less popular participation in government? Fewer rights for individuals? More exploitation of labor? Fewer public controls over the environment? Fewer social benefits to the poor and lower (as well as also fewer) taxes for the rich? More exploitation and subjugation of women and ethnic minorities? The answers are generally negative. The indicators may not be in all cases straight-forward 45 degree arrows, but they do, nevertheless, testify not to a static or a reactionary society, but one which may be properly termed "progressive." If perhaps all possible things have not improved at equal pace since, say, 1900, many have.

If Parenti were a serious student of the American system, surely, he would wish to inform his readers that not everything has been going "downhill" in the United States since the capitalists framed the Constitution—all the better to serve their predatory interests. In building his propaganda image, Parenti says that in 1975 at the number of those living below the government's poverty line increased by a record 10 percent. What he does not say is that taking a somewhat longer period into account, between 1965 and 1977, the

15. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, p. 366, Table 11.1.

percentage of Americans living below the "poverty line" decreased from 17.3 to 11.6 percent. In fact, it fell from 13.3 to 8.9 percent of the population among whites, and from 47.1 to 29.0 percent among non-whites. In the previous decade, according to the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, the national incidence of poverty had dropped from 22.1 percent in 1959 to 12.3 in 1969. The number of poor persons decreased significantly in every state of the Union, save Nevada. Thus, Parenti's "case" turns out to be a form of intellectual violence practiced on the unwary—a tendentious juxtaposition of those things, and only those things, which would tend to bring the "system" into disrepute.

It is of interest, in light of what Parenti has to say about U.S. life expectancy data, the plight of the aged, and the alleged degradation of the environment, that since World War II, U.S. life expectancy figures have continued to climb for both sexes and in all age groups. Where one born in the years 1949-51 could expect to live 68.1 years, the figure was 73.2 in 1977. For someone aged 55 in 1949-51, the additional life expectancy was 20.6 years and 23.5 in 1977. For someone 65 years old, the expectancy of life increased from 13.8 to 16.3 between 1949 and 1977.¹⁸

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture, an hour's work at average industrial wage bought a person anywhere from 50 to 300 percent more food in 1977 than it did in 1949. Thus, while an individual could buy 9.8 lbs. of bread in 1949, it became 16.5 lbs. in 1977. He could only get 1.9 lbs. of butter in 1949 but 4.2 lbs. in 1977; two dozen eggs in 1949 but 6.8 dozen in 1977; seven quarts of milk rose to 14.0 quarts. These figures, reflecting the very substantial growth of consumption in the United States, do not jibe with the picture of galloping starvation and misery projected by Parenti.

Between 1969 and 1974 federal outlays on social welfare programs increased from 24,957 to 137,191 million dollars; state and local from 27,337 to 102,206 millions.¹⁷

In simple dollar terms, social welfare expenditures increased from 23.4 billion in 1950 to 393.2 billion in 1978. In constant (1978) dollars, the expenditures rose from 62.1 to 393.2 billion.¹⁸ And as for

16. *Statistical Abstract*, *op. cit.*, p. 900, Table 1574.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 332, Table 534.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 331, Table 533. Interestingly enough, Albert Szymanski in a contemporaneous radical-Marxist critique *The Capitalist State and the Politics of Class* (Winthrop: Cambridge, 1978) acknowledges (and seeks to rationalize) some of the things

long-term redistribution, in the fifty year period between 1922 and 1972 the share of wealth held by the top one percent declined from 31.6 to 20.7 percent.¹⁹ In Parenti's discussion of military spending titled "The Pentagon: Billions for Big Brother," (pp. 83-90) the assumption is that the "specter of Soviet supremacy" is a myth. It is conjured up by the Pentagon and its supporters to assure the military ample tax dollars. There is not even any discussion of foreign affairs with relation to the military budget, no mention of the Cold War, or acknowledgment of the fact that many reasonably well informed people in America see some sort of Soviet challenge to U.S. security. The subject simply goes unmentioned, notwithstanding all its historical role in U.S. policy if nothing else.

left out of Parenti's textbook. Most importantly, perhaps, Szymanski shows that between 1960 and 1971 a substantial shift had occurred between federal social welfare and military expenditures: a decline from 33.9 to 23.6 percent of the budget for the latter and an increase from 14.6 to 21.2 percent for the former. Szymanski also shows that the ratio of social welfare to military expenditures rose from 0.45 in 1960 to 1.56 in 1974. See Tables 9-3, 9-4, p. 196. Szymanski also acknowledges the progressivity of the federal income tax system. Using the criterion of "federal income tax as percentage of income, 1960" he shows that where people with incomes of between 5,000 and 10,000 paid 11.0 percent in taxes, those over \$100,000 paid 34.6 percent and those over \$1,000,000 paid 32.3 percent. Needless to say, Szymanski finds this progressivity quite inadequate, while his own definition of "income" tends to emphasize the inadequacy. Nevertheless, he does acknowledge it. See p. 170, Table 8-6.

Szymanski's explanation for the welfare shift is characteristic of what may be termed "no-win" Marxian methodology.

There have been two reasons for the inexorable expansion of social spending and the relative contraction of military spending even against the barriers represented by vested interests. First, to maintain the legitimacy of capitalist institutions and the hegemony of the capitalist class, it has been necessary to spend more to satisfy the demands of the upper middle, working and underclasses to prevent the transformation of their discontent into opposition to the system. Consequently, subsidies to small-business people and farmers have had to be maintained, while welfare for the poor and social benefits (such as free medicine) for the working class have had to be expanded. The cost of preventing the rise of oppositional movements within the framework of formally democratic institutions increases.

Second, conditions in the world market are forcing the U.S. corporations to trim costs wherever they can to maintain the international competitive position of U.S. products...and are forcing the U.S. government to cut back on military expenditures. (pp. 196-197).

19. Abstract, p. 471, Table 785.

Another difficulty is the empirical "insulation" of the general hypothesis. How can we tell that the various elites noted by Parenti are really in control, and causing all the alleged, or at least implied, mischiefs? Here, Parenti, continuing in the tradition of Marx, backs away from any rigorously empirical tests.

The critical proposition, after all, from Parenti's vantage point, is capitalist domination of the American political system. But what does domination mean and how could it be demonstrated? Granted that business interests donate large sums—even preponderant sums—to politicians' campaign chests, does it follow that business interests also control the political process? Parenti, and several other like-minded critics, have been content to rest their case on preponderant contributions. Unfortunately (for them and for business interests), that is not enough. The case needs to be made with respect to how elections and policy questions are decided. In politics, "less money" has often defeated "more money."²¹ President Roosevelt defeated Alf Landon, Wendell Wilkie and Thomas Dewey despite, as best as we can tell, smaller campaign chests. If Republicans get more money from big business than Democrats, and generally have more money to spend on campaigns, then why have Democrats controlled the Congress most of the time since the 1930's? Business interests have often lost on any number of legislative, fiscal, or public policy issues addressed in the political arena, issues to which business seems to have attached considerable importance as evidenced by advertising, publicity campaigns, lobbying, and all the rest.²² Parenti and his ilk not only gloss over all the obvious divi-

20. What does the elite do? According to Lundberg, e.g.,

It involves the nation in cycles of ferocious wars that are to the interests of asset preservation and asset expansion but are contrary to the interests of the nation and the world. *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

21. For some important qualifications of the "money-is-all-that-matters" approach see John R. Owens and Edward C. Olson, "Campaign Spending and the Electoral Process in California, 1966-1974," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. XXX, No. 4, December 1977, pp. 493-511; also John R. Owens *Trends in Campaign Spending in California, 1958-1970* (Princeton, N.J., Citizens' Research Foundation 1973); *Money and Politics in California: Democratic Senatorial Primary, 1964* (Princeton, N.J., Citizens' Research Foundation, 1966.

22. See Richard M. Gable, "NAM: Influential Lobby or Kiss of Death?," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 15, 1953, pp. 253-273. See also Raymond L. Bauer *et al.*, *American Business and Public Policy* (Chicago: Aldrine-Alberton, 1972), part 4; Edwin M. Epstein, *The Corporation in American Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969), esp. pp. 298-304; see also Neil H. Jacoby, *Corporate Power and Social Responsibility* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

sions *among* business interests inasmuch as these expose their ideal monolith to be a mere myth; they also scrupulously refrain from any empirical analyses of business "policy-box-scores" because the conclusions here would be likewise uncomfortably pluralistic and mixed.

If business is so completely in charge, with the politicians, bureaucrats and everybody else who matters in the corporate "back pocket," why is it that business leaders are so often publicly unhappy about government policies? Has business-all big business, let us say-been getting all that it wants whenever it wants from the politicians when it comes to such things as environmental and pollution controls, occupational safety regulations, minimum wage, taxes, and depreciation allowances as in oil depletion, e.g., protection of the domestic automobile or steel markets, assured agricultural commodity outlets, just to name a few issues? If business has been often thwarted and frustrated along with other interests in the society, the thesis needs to be reexamined.

The problem of making the power elite theory operational-trying to show how the elite really controls the political process-is at least attempted by G. William Domhoff. The results, however, are, quite frankly, pathetic.²³ Domhoff says that to study the question of elite domination through a decision-making approach would be too difficult because it would be hard to specify

"key" political issues, the real interests of protagonists, the factors²⁴ involved in the decision, and the long-run consequences of the outcome."

It doesn't occur to Domhoff that, hard as it may be, it is not an intellectually tenable position to charge domination but also insist that it is too difficult to prove.

Domhoff says that the

... most important objection that is usually raised against a governing-class model concerns the apparent autonomy of the federal government..." (p. 152)

but

23. See Chapter 7 in *Who Rules America?* (Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), pp. 138-156.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

the fact remains that a very wealthy upper class which makes concessions (?) remains a wealthy upper class.²⁶

So, existence is domination!

Now, why do businessmen complain about the government if they own it? Domhoff says that small businessmen are the ones who "have good reason to complain" because they are not the controllers of government; the corporate rich are in charge.²⁷ Simultaneously, however, Domhoff shows that big business, or as he says, "the biggest of the big" disproportionately supported the Republican Party in the 50's and 60's.²⁸ That modern Republicanism has been associated with a strong anti-government bias is reasonably well known.

Parenti treats the question of policy outcomes in a metaphysical, once-and-for-all fashion. The existence of capitalism and private property is proof enough of the dominance of big business in the political process. All else (taxation, tariffs, regulation, labor laws, product liability, all the day-to-day issues) is somehow "unimportant." Perhaps the *only* action which could disprove business dominance would be an act of total expropriation of private property passed by politicians elected with business support. Like many of his cohorts, Parenti does not even give passing thought to the possibility that the institutions of private property, inheritance, and business itself are maintained because, in the last analysis, the overwhelming majority of people in the society support them. Even if that could be demonstrated, as in occasional public opinion polls, Parenti's cosmology would forbid it. Such phenomena seem to be tucked away in his Marxian drawer marked "coercion and deception of the masses."

Given the grossly distorted perspective of Parenti's book, the question is how could it serve as a college text about American politics

26. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

28. *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, pp. 87-88. See, among others, Everett C. Ladd, Jr., *Where Have All the Voters Gone? The Fracturing of America's Parties* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp. 16-18. While there are tensions between "big business" executives and conservative Republican politicians on the question of government role in business, "most corporate executives still identify with the GOP. In a 1976 *Fortune* survey, 56 percent of the chief executive officers of the *Fortune* 500 called themselves Republicans, 6 percent Democrats, and 3 percent said they were independents, p. 17. See also Charles O. Jones, *The Republican Party in Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 69-71.

and find an obviously substantial and sympathetic audience among educated Americans? After all, three editions have been published in six years by St. Martin's Press, and such publishing decisions are usually justified only by gratifying sales. One might recall here that when Ferdinand Lundberg's *The Rich and the Super-Rich* appeared in 1968, it was not only a best seller; the book went through seven printings between June and November of that year alone.

For reasons already given, this reviewer does not see the appeal of these critiques in "telling it like it is." That is perhaps the very antithesis of their appeal. "Telling it like it is" about the political world would probably turn out rather dull. Complexity and lack of sure-fire villains and heroes rarely make entertaining reading. One of the reasons suggested here is that among American intellectuals-in-profound contradiction of Mr. Parenti's teachings about elite domination-books written from a leftist, Marxian or neo-Marxian *anti-status quo* perspective are likely to be indulged. They are far more likely to be acceptable and seen as valuable, brilliant, and incisive-at least usefully thought-provoking if not altogether right-than off-beat books written from the extreme-right point of view. This situation probably reflects certain traditional staffing patterns and personnel balances of the American academy, especially in the social sciences (again at odds with Parenti's view of American society).

But it also seems to this reviewer that there are other, more important reasons for this acceptance. There are significant socio-psychological sources for the appeal of this and similarly grotesque critiques of the American political system. Such books are likely to satisfy a craving among those who, unhappy with society and their role in it, are likely to view government and the political process as culprits. The nature of the unhappiness has little to do with anything that Parenti, or people like Lundberg, Kolko or Domhoff talk about. That hardly matters. The feelings of politically directed,

29. See, e.g., Everett C. Ladd, Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset, *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), Chapter 3 especially. "American academics have stood further left politically than any other major occupational group for a long time." p. 55. In a specific inquiry into political views of professors in various disciplines, the authors found faculty in the social sciences much more "liberal" and "very liberal" than in all (twelve) other fields. Among social science instructors, only 4 percent classified themselves as "very conservative" while 26 percent saw themselves as "very liberal." p. 60, Table 10.

or as Harold Lasswell might say, politically displaced malaise are far more critical. Books such as Parenti's make it possible for an individual to focus a wide variety of grievances upon the political system, identify the villains, and simultaneously achieve the gratifying sensation of entirely absolving oneself and other "ordinary people" from any blame. This is a psychologically attractive formula.

Religious tracts may ask people to acknowledge and repent of their evil ways, or they may emphasize salvation at the price of particular actions and beliefs. In any case, they remind people of their individual responsibilities and of the frailties of man. Left wing tracts, since the time of the Enlightenment (Mr. Parenti's included), have offered man-in-the-mass a pristine absolution. The "masses" and ordinary human beings who compose the masses are blameless creatures, almost bloodless in their rectitude.

Evil and folly, including such phenomena as cheating, lying, stealing, being cruel and greedy, lazy or mean, malevolent, destructive, domineering, and deceitful, are not the qualities of ordinary people. They are the true qualities only of people who occupy corporation board rooms, government offices, courts, and just about all the places where there is, or seems to be, "power" (especially the Pentagon, CIA and FBI, in our day). If the phenomena of evil and folly are ever encountered elsewhere, it is only because they have been induced by the inhuman oppression of the powerful elite and would certainly wither away-if not vanish like a dream-if only that oppression were withdrawn or liquidated. As with Marx and Engels, there is no concept of sin on the Left. All sense of woe and evil is externalized to certain culpable agencies or agents. There seems to be greater comfort in this world view even (perhaps especially) for the intellectuals.

30. Lundberg is an exception in this radical mainstream. His view of man seems rather negative and pessimistic. Writing about politics, he says:

Party managers must find men ready, able and willing to campaign and at the same time men who will be acceptable to a broad, culturally differentiated, intellectually and emotionally low-grade public—Mencken's boobs, Barnum's suckers, Kipling's "muddled oafs." *Op. cit.*, p. 695.

The common man is politically empty... " p. 694.

and elsewhere:

...The electoral process, owing to the childish nature and behavior of the public, is expensive... p. 698.

With all due respect to the uncertainties of social theorizing, one is tempted to speculate about the malaise that really supplies the audience for the Left's "caricature-with-Utopia." The need for the solace that Mr. Parenti and his ilk provide is not material and physically tangible for the most part. It is better explained by the works of William Kornhauser, Pitrim Sorokin, and Daniel Bell than those of Parenti, Lundberg or Domhoff. American society is not only the richest in the world, it is far more progressive and equitable than leftist critics acknowledge. But American society, like many other industrialized, advanced polities of the world, has developed a significant socio-psychological malaise. The sense of meaning, purpose, social cohesion, and identity have been undermined, not by a handful of capitalist conspirators but by the continuing industrial-bureaucratic-technological transformation of society itself. Modern man has been man uprooted, man in a whirlwind of change, uncertainty, obsolescence, transient social relationships, vulnerability and frustration. Affluence and technology have not solved man's moral and spiritual problems; bureaucracy and interdependence have added to his frustrations.

Material progress has not eliminated or even reduced, it would seem, conflict in human society. While we may have raised the average wage, prolonged life expectancy, reduced inequalities and given people more amenities than ever before, we have also increased the divorce rate and the deaths that are due to cirrhosis of the liver, violent crime, suicide and drug addiction. While we may, of course, go on blaming the politicians (or the capitalists as their alleged masters), there is no evidence that better and more equitable living standards have made or would make us more peaceable, happier, tranquil, and, above all, more moderate in our expectations of society or one another. Quite the opposite seems true. Thus, the moral and psychological distress of modernity in its widest sense has provided and is likely to continue to provide support for the most varied and grotesque assaults on the political order. Parenti's *Democracy for the Few* is merely one of them.

The "elite domination" studies are rooted in a methodology of alienation. Their common assumption is that the society of which the investigator is a part (as distinguished from other societies-Utopian, socialist or Communist) is generally made up of two kinds of people-the deceivers and the deceived. The oppressor-exploiters lie and cheat, while the oppressed are, for the most part, taken in by

oppressor propaganda. Having once committed themselves to this view, the alienated investigator cannot deal with political phenomena at anything close to face value. What the capitalists want cannot possibly be inferred from what they say that they want. The capitalists disguise their true interests and intentions so as to be more effective. What they really want is either the product of conspiracy, or of impersonal forces of which even individual capitalists may not be consciously cognizant. Granted the power of domination, capitalists cannot lose in domestic political conflicts, even though it might sometimes seem as if they were losing. The leash of their control is simply being extended so as to make their domination all the more secure and manageable. On the other pole of the deceiver-deceived dichotomy, stand the "masses" with which the investigator usually sympathizes as one would with the victim of a crime. However, as political actors, these people cannot be taken at "face value" either. What they say they want, or what they believe, even their overt behavior, all this cannot be accepted in straightforward terms because of the distortion introduced into the social system by the manipulations of the deceivers. These distortions are likely to reflect the whole gamut of institutional, legal, financial, economic and political entrapment and trickery. The masses do not understand their own position. They are not aware of the real alternatives and problems of the system. They are inhibited and thwarted by elites in ways that are too subtle for most of them to appreciate. Given such conditions, there is an unbridgeable chasm between what actually happens in the political system, and what ought to be happening in it. And thus political realities cannot be grasped by such tainted empirical devices as elections, primaries, public opinion polls, or expenditure and income shifts, not to mention the records of what people say about their own aspirations, intentions, and beliefs.³¹ The reward of alienated methodology is that it is immune to disappointment. It offers a perpetual intellectual solace to the emotions of estrangement.

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31. See, for example, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, "The Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review*, December 1962, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 947-952; Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967) and Michael Parenti, *Power and the Powerless* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).