

## *The United States: hope for the little guy*

There is not supposed to be a Left in the United States, at least not in the same sense or with the same force as there is a Left in the rest of the world. It is nevertheless vital to turn the debate about the future of the Left into an American debate.

In the first place, it is vital because the United States is not only the predominant power in the world; it is a power that has failed to remain in imaginative touch with the rest of humanity. The great ideological debates that shake the world today seem distant and dangerous fantasies when rehearsed within the United States, unlike the ideological contests of the nineteenth century,

which echoed within Great Britain. The bias of Americans is that the rest of the world must either languish in poverty and despotism or become more like them. This failure of imagination is a source of immense danger. The only way to redress it is for Americans to recognize the fundamental similarity of their predicament to the condition of other contemporary societies: similarity in the range of the most pressing problems as well as in the character of the most pertinent solutions.

In the second place, it is vital because the distinction between the two faces that the rich North Atlantic world has shown to the rest of humanity is fast losing its clarity. As European social democracy hollows out its historical agenda in the pursuit of a supposed synthesis between European-style social protection and American-style economic flexibility, the hope of taking European social democracy as a point of the departure for the development of an alternative of worldwide interest weakens. The value of establishing the beginnings of an alternative inside the United States increases.

In the third place, it is vital just because the United States is not only the hegemonic power in the world; it is also the power whose ruling interests and beliefs are most closely associated with the emerging form of the global order. Globalization has very largely meant Americanization, not only in the realm of economic forces and political power but also in the domain of ideas and ideals.

A conception of human life and of its prospects has taken over the world. It is the most powerful religion of humanity today. This religion lies at the center of the historical aspirations of the Left. No country identifies more completely with this creed than the United States. How can it be that the country most fully identified with the doctrine central to the Left is the one that is supposed to have no Left?

The answer is that the United States accepts the religion in truncated or perverted form. Because it is the preponderant power in the world, this American heresy and its correction concern everyone.

The religion of humanity presents the self as transcendent over context: incapable of being contained within any limited mental or social structure. Not satisfied occasionally to rebel, it wants to fashion a principle that makes rebellion permanent, and renders it internal to social life, in the form of ongoing experimental remaking.

No institutional and imaginative ordering of social life accommodates all our strivings. The next best thing to such an all-inclusive order is the combination of experimental pluralism – different directions – with experimental self-correction – each direction subject to the condition that it ease its own revision.

The aim is the creation of a self that is less the plaything of accidental circumstance and the puppet of compulsive social routine; a more godlike self. Such

a self is able to imagine and to accept other selves as the context-transcending agents they all really are. It can experience a form of empowerment untainted by the exercise of oppression and by the illusions of pre-eminence. To this end, society must equip the individual – every individual – with the educational and economic instruments he needs to lift himself up and to make himself more godlike.

This faith in self-construction goes together in the contemporary religion of humanity with a faith in human solidarity. At its extreme limit, it is the visionary conviction, belied but not destroyed by the terrors of ordinary social life, that all men and women are bound together by an invisible circle of love. In its more prosaic form, it is the historical insight that the practical benefits of social life all arise from cooperation and connection.

That form of cooperation will be most productive that is least bound by the restraints of any established scheme of social division and hierarchy and that is most successful in moderating the tension between the imperatives of cooperation and innovation. Every innovation – technical, organizational, or ideological – jeopardizes the present system of cooperation because it threatens to upset the social regime of rights and expectations in which cooperative relations are embedded. We should prefer the way of organizing cooperation that minimizes this tension. It will gen-

erally be one that makes the endowments and equipments of individuals independent of the accidents of their birth as well as of the particulars of their position; that rejects all social and cultural predetermination of how people can work together; and that encourages the spread of an experimentalist impulse, harnessing confrontation with the unexpected to create the new.

The most valuable form of connection will enable people to diminish the price of dependence and depersonalization that we must pay for engagement with others. Self-construction depends on connection, and connection threatens to entangle us in toils of subjugation and to rob us of the very distinction that we can develop only thanks to it. There is a conflict between the enabling conditions of self-affirmation. To diminish that conflict is to become freer and greater, not by living apart but by living together while deepening the experience of self-possession.

Such is the twofold gospel of the divinization of humanity, in the name of which the torch has been set, and will yet be set, to every empire in the world. It is the message that should forever lie at the heart of the work of the Left. It can be advanced only through the remaking of both our arrangements and our sensibilities. It has been central to American democracy and to the form of globalization with which American hegemony is associated, and yet in that democracy and that globalization, misshapen and diminished.

One aspect of the perversion is a failure to acknowledge the extent to which the institutional structure of society is open to revision and the extent to which it holds hostage what people understand to be their interests and ideals. It has been a besetting myth of American civilization to suppose that Americans early discovered the basic formula of a free society, to be adjusted only rarely, under pressure of national emergency. The three great periods of institutional effervescence in the United States were the time of independence, the time of Civil War and the time of the mid-twentieth Depression and world conflict. Only then were they partly freed from the stranglehold of institutional superstition.

This fetishism of the institutional formula, most completely manifest in the cult of the Constitution, is an extreme instance of a conformism that is now in danger of seducing the whole world and of defeating the essential goal of the Left. The greatest price that it has exacted from American democracy is failure to progress in the realization of the most persistent American dream – an American variant on what has now become a worldwide aspiration.

This aspiration is the dream of a society made for the little guy: a country in which ordinary men and women can stand on their own feet, morally and socially as well as economically, achieving a degree of prosperity and independence as well as the resources

of independent judgment and the claims to equal respect that past societies largely reserved for an elite. In the initial decades of America's life as an independent country, this dream had a tangible and immediate expression: only one in ten of free white men worked for another man at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is a commitment that has since proved unable to impose its stamp on the forces shaping American society.

Two institutional vehicles have carried the weight of this dream in American history. The first device has been the defense of small property and small business against great wealth and big business. The second device has been the appeal to the regulatory and redistributive powers of the national government. Neither instrument has prevailed against the consequences of the hierarchical segmentation of the economy. Neither has sufficed to make the dream real. To realize the dream further than those two vehicles can go would require reshaping the economic and political institutions of the country, and doing so without the aid of a crisis. It is a reformation that the vice of institutional fetishism denies to American democracy.

The other major perversion of the religion of humanity among the Americans lies in the imagination of the link between self-construction and solidarity. If the predominant tendencies of consciousness in American life have understated the extent to which

society can be reorganized, they have also exaggerated the degree to which the individual can save himself without needing to be saved by the grace of other people. A little Napoleon who takes the crown, and crowns himself, has been the illusion that perpetually seduces them.

To this mirage of self-reliance turning into self-salvation Americans owe their common oscillation between an extreme individualism and an equal extreme collectivism (seemingly opposites but in fact reverse sides of each other), their attraction to the middle distance of pseudo-intimacy and cheerful impersonal friendliness in social relations (like Schopenhauer's porcupines moving uneasily between the distance at which they get cold and the closeness at which they prick one another), and their endless quest for ways to deny frailty, dependence, and death (even at the cost of a mummification of the self and mystification of its true condition in the world).

It is this idea of the self, and of its disengagement from the formative claims of solidarity, that the rest of humanity vaguely but rightly understands to animate much of the institutional formula the United States seeks to propagate throughout the world and to entrench in the arrangements of globalization. This idea deserves to be resisted, and it will be resisted, because it represents a gross misdirection in the religion of humanity.

Their misdirection has not, however, prevented Americans from excelling in the cooperative practices, and from advancing in the development of those innovation-friendly forms of cooperation in economic and social life from which we must expect the greatest contributions to the practical progress of mankind. To this skill we must credit their demonstrated ability to succeed under a broad range of circumstances and rules with equal success, as they did when world war required them to adopt arrangements and practices that were anathema to their official ideology.

They live under the most extreme class hierarchies of the rich democracies, yet they are second to none in denying the legitimacy of class and of its blight on equal opportunity. They have failed to equip the masses of ordinary men and women with the instruments of initiative and innovation, but they retain faith in the creative powers of plain people. They surrender to institutional fetishism, however, only by according to their institutions a scandalous and costly exemption from the experimentalist impulse that otherwise remains so powerful a force in their culture.

If only they could free themselves from their institutional idolatry and imagine more truly the relation of self to other, they could realize their dreams more fully, and correct them in the course of realizing them. Many of the intangible barriers that separate them

from the imaginative life of the age and of the world would fall away. They would no longer be adversaries of the Left, even though they might not describe themselves as Leftists, because they would have joined the central current of the development of the religion of humanity. And it is the combination of this religion with the disposition to renew the restricted repertory of institutional arrangements to which the world is now confined that has come to define the identity and the work of the Left.

Today the focus of the problem in the United States is the absence of a credible successor to the New Deal. Roosevelt's settlement in the mid-twentieth century was the American equivalent to the social-democratic compromise and the last great experiment — however limited in scope and dependent on the favoring circumstance of crisis — with the institutions of the country. Yet its focus on the development of the regulatory and redistributive powers of national government, rather than on democratizing the market or on deepening democracy, and on economic security, rather than on economic empowerment, is no longer suited to the tasks of the day.

The failure of American progressives to offer, within or outside the Democratic party, an effective sequel to the Rooseveltian project has rendered them powerless to respond to the great downward changes that overtook American democracy from the 1960s

on: increasing inequality in wealth and income, and most strikingly, inequality in the compensation of labor at different levels of the wage hierarchy; stagnant or decreasing intergenerational mobility among social classes; shrinking popular participation in politics; and diminishing engagement in associational activity outside the boundaries of family life. These inflections are American variations on shifts common to all the rich North Atlantic democracies.

Any Left proposal that can speak to the most urgent problems of the United States must supply remedies against these changes, and turn the response to them into an opportunity both to realize and to rectify the American dream. Such a response must in turn be informed by an understanding of how and why these changes came about. Consider the outline of such an explanation; it includes the slow time of economic and cultural change as well as the fast time of decisive political events. All these elements – even the uniquely American political episodes – are characteristic of circumstances in which and against which the Left must now work throughout the world.

The slow economic change, which took place during the later part of the twentieth century, was a sharpening of the hierarchical segmentation of the economy, accompanying a shift in the organization of production. As mass production declined, replaced, in services as well as in industry, by knowledge-intensive,

more flexible production, the core historical constituency of the progressives, unionized industrial labor, shrank. The emerging forms of production placed a premium on educational endowments that the professional and business class was best able to transmit to its children. The elite schools trained students in distinctive conceptual practices and social skills – talkative teamwork and personal charisma, carefully concealed under a veneer of pliant self-depreciation. Such practices and skills were alien to the social worlds and the public schools of the working-class majority, with their emphasis on the alternation between organizational and intellectual conformity at work and at school and off-time fantasy and rebellion. The synthesis of class hierarchy and meritocratic principle that has come to characterize all the rich countries thus finds support in the biases of production and of education.

A shift in consciousness, not directly related to this change in production, has nevertheless accompanied it. Alongside the neo-Christian and post-Romantic narratives of the mass popular culture, with their formulaic versions of redemption through engagement and connection, and of recovery and ennoblement, through sacrifice and loss, a contrasting set of themes has won increasing space. In this neo-pagan vision, exhibited in the game and reality shows on popular television, as well as in some of the most

refined productions of the high culture, the protagonist seeks to triumph, by guile and tenacity, in an arbitrary world, bereft of human as well as of divine grace. He spins the wheel of fortune rather than embarking on an adventure of self-construction based on the acceptance of vulnerability. At the center of this neo-pagan dispensation is a wavering of hope: the hope – central to the contemporary religion of humanity – that the transformation of society and the transformation of the self can advance hand in hand.

In a setting shaped by these changes in production and consciousness, the political direction taken by the would-be successors to Roosevelt in the final decades of the twentieth century followed the path of least resistance. It was a path that helped aggravate the effect of the anti-egalitarian and antisocial shifts that were changing the country, and that helped disorient and disarm the progressive forces in their resistance to those tendencies. Yet it was a direction that wore the outward appearance of realism and prudence.

Under the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, the very time to which in hindsight we can first trace the inflections, a social and racial orthodoxy that was to contribute to the undoing of the progressives first crystallized. Roosevelt's commitment to programs, like Social Security, responsive to the anxieties and interests of a broad working-class majority was re-

placed by a "War on Poverty" that targeted its benefits to a distinct minority of poor people and that circumvented the machines of traditional working-class politics in the large cities. It was a mistake that the architects of European social democracy had been careful to avoid.

Racial oppression was defined as a threshold evil, to be redressed prior to any attack on economic injustice and class hierarchy. This self-styled integrationist orthodoxy became the basis for programs, like race-conscious affirmative action, that antagonized many who might have participated in a project responsive to the needs and aspirations of a transracial working-class majority in the country.

In the succeeding decades, three connected sets of events reinforced the inhibiting effect of these choices.

One was the attempt by the progressives to use judicial politics to circumvent political politics. This circumvention biased the emphasis of the progressive project toward reforms focusing on redefinitions and reallocations of individual rights rather than on reconstructions of institutional life. These were the reforms that an elite of judicial reformers could most plausibly undertake before being brought back into line by the balance of political forces.

A second series of events was the federalization of a "modernist" moral agenda (abortion being the cutting issue) embraced in large numbers by the secular, the

urban, the educated, and the propertied in the name of the progressive cause but in defiance of the beliefs of many who were needed to move it forward.

A third succession of events was the reemergence of “sound-finance doctrine” – the primacy of financial confidence in the conduct of macroeconomic policy – as the successor to a Keynesian orthodoxy that no longer spoke to the circumstance of the day. No attempt was made to harness the achievement of financial confidence to any affirmative attempt to mobilize saving, in new ways and by new devices, for production, invention, and innovation.

These repeated compromises, retreats, and misdirections, reinforced one another. Their effect in deepening the antidemocratic inflections – greater economic inequality, restricted class mobility, less political participation, thinner social connections – was sealed by the principle that war trumps reform (unless by requiring full-scale national mobilization of people and resources it provokes institutional experimentation). They were not the unavoidable reactions in national politics to the economic and cultural shifts the country had undergone; they were only the responses that proved easiest to give, turning lack of imagination into fate.

It was the background of a conservative hegemony, repeating in many of its elements and presuppositions the conservative ascendancy of the late nineteenth

century. The linchpin of this hegemony was the success of conservative statecraft in the United States in combining recourse to the economic interests of the moneyed classes with appeal to the moral beliefs and political skepticism of the white working class outside the large cities. It was then that in the United States, as in much of the rest of the world, the program of the progressives became the program of their conservative adversaries, with a humanizing discount.

The programmatic response the Left should propose to this circumstance in the United States must begin with two preliminaries, redefining the racial and social pseudo-progressive orthodoxies formed in the late twentieth century. This response should have as its core a political economy of democracy, democratizing the market by reshaping both the forms of production (including the relation of government to business) and the condition of labor. It must be extended through innovations encouraging civil society to organize itself outside both government and business, and energizing democratic politics.

The first preliminary concerns the relation between race and class. There have been four main projects for the redress of racial injustice in the United States. The best hope for advance lies in a certain way of combining the third and the fourth approaches while going beyond both of them.

The first approach was the collaborationist project

of Booker T. Washington, put forward in the decades following the Civil War. The solution proposed was to occupy a secure but subordinate position in the economy – the petty-bourgeois position of the small-holder, the shopkeeper, the craftsman – on the basis of modest property distribution and vocational training. The paradox, at once political and programmatic, is that even such a seemingly modest program requires (or would have required in its time) large-scale political and social mobilization, which, once aroused, would have demanded more than this orientation could ensure.

The second approach has been the secessionist project – withdrawal from American society, even return to Africa. It has proved to be a feint. Although its tone has traditionally been voiced in belligerent contrast to the sweetness of the collaborationist strategy, its practical expression has been the same: retreat not into a separate land but into an internal exile of small business under a leadership committed to impose, in the name of religious authority, petty-bourgeois norms of respectability.

The third approach is the integrationist project that would treat racial injustice as a threshold concern distinguishable from class injustice and prior to it. Its most characteristic expression has been affirmative action although its more fundamental work was the defense of civil rights for racial minorities. Its un-

doubted historical achievement has been the establishment of a black professional and business class.

However, it suffers from three defects. The first is that its benefits accrue in inverse proportion to the need for them: most to the professional and business class, less to the working class, especially of public employees; least of all to the underclass. The second defect is that it separates the black leadership from the mass of poor black people, accommodating them in the existing order as virtual representatives of those who are very largely denied its fruits. The third defect is that it offends the material and moral interests of the white working class, which reasonably believes itself to be the victim of a conspiracy of sanctimonious and self-serving elites, including the elite of those who claim to represent the downtrodden.

Confusing the struggle against racial discrimination with the social and economic advancement of a racially stigmatized minority, the integrationist orthodoxy achieves neither of these goals squarely. The alternative is to build on a fourth, reconstructive approach to the race problem and to reconcile it with the strong suit of the integrationist approach: its commitment to overcome the evil of discrimination on the basis of race. The keynote of the reconstructive view is to treat the problems of race and class as inseparable and to implement a political economy that deals with the evils produced by their combina-

tion. Its preeminent expression in American history was the short-lived work of the Freedmen's Bureau from 1865 to 1869, broadening economic and educational opportunity under the slogan "forty acres and a mule."

Individualized racial discrimination should be treated as a distinct evil, and criminalized. Active promotion of access to better schools, better jobs, and higher social position should be afforded on the basis of a "neutral principle": the entrapment of a group of people in a circumstance of disadvantage and exclusion from which they cannot escape by the readily available means of economic and political initiative. The fundamental criterion must therefore be class rather than race. It will nevertheless reach race by reaching class, without taint by the inversion of benefit and need, because of the racial bias in the composition of the underclass.

Race may nevertheless figure without imposing this taint. The combination of different sources of disadvantage — first among which are class and race — increases the likelihood that the disadvantage will prove hard to escape. That conjecture, however, must be tested against experience; and only insofar as it holds in fact should it apply as law.

If the reformation of the treatment of racial injustice, and of the relation between race and class, is the first great preliminary to a Left program for the

United States and in an American idiom, the second is the rethinking of how progressives should address the conflicting moral agendas in American society. At the turn of the twenty-first century the foremost fighting issue of the day was abortion, as a hundred years earlier it had been prohibition. It has become conventional to call these agendas traditionalist and modernist, religious and secular. In fact each of them expressed a response to contemporary experience, and each could be stated in secular as well as in religious form.

The decision by the progressives not only to espouse the modernist agenda, but to enforce it by federal power and federal law was a practical calamity. Together with the racial orthodoxy, it helped diminish the chances of winning the support of a supra-racial working-class majority for a progressive national project.

It was, however, not only a mistake in tactics; it was also a failure of vision. Both the contending agendas were deficient as bearers of the religion of humanity. One revealed the moral prejudices of a Christianity that had subordinated the heart to the rulebook, and that had struck a deal with cultural and social orders that it was the calling of a Christian to defy. The other carried the stain of a heartless narcissism and gratification, alien to the sacrificial impulse on which all hope for the divinization of humanity depends. If the Leftist

had an interest, it was not to enforce one of these agendas against the other; it was to radicalize the conflict between them in the hope that from this contest something deeper and truer might result.

The means by which to accomplish both the tactical and the programmatic goal is to return to the states the decision concerning the issues in contest. The almost certain result would be divergence among the states in the relative weight they would give to each agenda, and the consequent deepening of the national debate. With respect to the star moral-agenda issue of the day, poor women who would need to travel from states forbidding abortion to those permitting it would be the greatest victims. The burden, however, could be lifted by the simple expedient of organizing to transport them to the permitting states, and paying for their transport. It is a small price to pay for the cutting of one of the Gordian knots that now threatens to strangle the progressive cause in America.

The heart of a Left agenda for the United States must be a proposal in political economy. The core concern, as in the reformation of European social democracy, should be to democratize the market economy. It cannot be belatedly to import into the United States the arrangements of a European social democracy that is now embarrassed on its home ground. As in the European setting, this democratizing project presupposes a mobilization of national

resources for new productive initiatives: at the limit, a war economy without a war. Here as there a guiding aim must be readiness for innovation achieved by means that ensure socially inclusive empowerment rather than by devices that generalize insecurity and aggravate inequality. It is the only way to reverse the consequences of the hierarchical segmentation of the economy in the real circumstances of the rich North Atlantic countries.

The chief elements of this mobilization are: the raising of the tax take by reliance on taxes that are regressive in the short run but nevertheless progressive in overall effect by virtue of their place within a broader program; the forced increase of the level of domestic saving, especially through reforms to the private and public pension systems; and the creation of new linkages between private or public saving and production, both within and outside the capital markets as they are now organized. A brief word about each of these concerns will suffice to highlight the points at which the American circumstances deviate significantly from the European in the constraints they impose on the accomplishment of such goals.

No activist program of governmental initiative in economic empowerment can be carried out in the United States without a rise in the tax take. And no such rise in the tax take can take place without heavy reliance on the form of taxation – the transactions-

oriented taxation of consumption in the form of the comprehensive flat-rate value-added tax — that is unequivocally regressive in its immediate effect. The attempt to increase overtly redistributive taxation elicits an economic and political reaction that overshadows and interrupts its vaunted progressive aims. The short-term acceptance of price-neutral regressive taxation, capable of delivering the greatest tax yield for the least economic disruption, can justify itself not only if it enables more redistributive social spending but also and above all if it forms — and is seen to form — an integral part of an effort to democratize economic and educational opportunity. In their attitudes to taxation the American progressives need to stop genuflecting to redistributive pieties that have served only to prejudice redistributive results. They cannot do so without braving the risks and the paradoxes inherent in transformative action.

Although no large country now saves less than the United States, none has been more successful in financing new enterprise. Yet in none is the relative disconnection between the trading of positions in the capital and equity markets and the effective financing of production more apparent. The measures for the broadening of economic opportunity on the supply side that are explored in the following paragraphs would have to be accompanied by efforts to expand the role of venture capital beyond the terrain in which

it is accustomed to work. The principle of such an expansion is always the same: use the market when possible, and entities established by government but mimicking the market — or anticipating another broader and more pluralistic capital market than the one that now exists — when necessary.

If the realities of American economic relations to the rest of the world did not force an increase in the level of domestic saving, a project like the one I propose here would nevertheless require it. This increase could be achieved by forced mandatory saving through the public and private pension systems on a steeply progressive scale. It could be ensured as well by a tax that would give a progressive tilt to the indirect taxation of consumption: the sharply progressive taxation of individual consumption, falling on the difference between the total income and the invested saving of each taxpayer, and thus hitting what must always be the chief target of progressive taxation — the hierarchy of individual standards of living.

To democratize the market economy must mean much the same in the United States as it means in Europe and in other contemporary rich social democracies. It is a commitment requiring initiatives on both the supply and the demand sides of the economy.

The variety of instruments of economic vitality in the United States is such — with its longstanding decentralization of credit, its readiness for risk and

novelty, its habits of practical ingenuity, and its absence of significant barriers to start-up business – that nothing short of the boldest supply-side initiatives would, by an apparent paradox, make a difference in this the most unequal of the advanced economies. That which in the European setting I defined as the maximum goal – to use the powers of government to propagate advanced experimentalist practices of production outside their favored and habitual terrain in capital, knowledge and technology-intensive sectors of the economy – should here be taken as the minimum one.

What the American federal and state governments did in the nineteenth century for the organization of what became the most efficient system of agricultural production in world history – helping to underwrite a system of cooperative competition among family farmers, forging instruments for risk management, and opening access to resources and markets – these tasks governments must now undertake on a larger scale and with a different focus. The scale must be the whole of the industrial and service economy. The focus must be the creation, through governmental and collective action, of functional equivalents to the preconditions of advanced experimentalist production and the propagation of the local organizational and technical innovations that have proved most successful.

Those equivalents are necessary because these pre-conditions are missing in much of even the most advanced economies. They include organizations that screen and enhance credit; that adapt advanced technology to more rudimentary conditions; that give people access to continuing education while they have jobs and re-skill them when they are between jobs; that provide instruments for the effective management of risk when such instruments are not made readily available by existing market institutions; and that support networks of cooperative competition enabling teams of technicians and entrepreneurs to pool resources and to realize economies of scale and scope. The diffusion of the most successful local practices is in turn most useful when it strengthens the links between advanced and backward sectors of the economy, and engages people in the habits and methods of permanent innovation and cooperative competition.

The agent of this institutional reshaping of the market economy cannot be a central bureaucracy guiding from on high. It must be a range of governmentally established and funded social and economic organizations that emulate the market, in competition with one another as well as with standard private businesses, with staffs rewarded for performance as measured by the very markets they help open up.

Their mission is not to regulate or to compensate. It

is to create markets for more people and in more ways. It is from the variety of their relations to the people and the firms with which they deal that one can hope for the eventual emergence of alternative regimes of property and contract. The market-oriented idea of free recombination will thus be generalized and radicalized by being imported into the institutional framework of the market itself. In its present dogmatic form it consigns the majority of working-class men and women to what has increasingly become a form of precarious busy work, sufficient to protect against poverty but not to empower and to enlighten. It therefore also condemns the would-be little Napoleon of the American dream to frustration and fantasy.

In the United States as in Europe, such progressive interventions on the supply side – less the regulation of the market than its reshaping – would have to be matched by progressive interventions on the demand side. However, rather than taking the form of monetary and fiscal boosts to popular consumption, this second order of initiatives would best address the position of labor. In no democracy, rich or poor, has the position of labor – its share of national income, its degree of internal segmentation, its level of organized power, influence, and security – degenerated more dramatically over the last forty years than in the United States. It is a circumstance not only unjust and disempowering in itself but also subversive of all other

*The United States: hope for the little guy*

aspects of a program like the one advanced here. It destroys the link between the accumulation of wealth in society and the ability of the ordinary worker to enjoy the benefits of economic growth. Moreover, it arouses an impatient anxiety that is at least as likely to help the Right as it is likely to serve the Left.

To generalize the principle of sharing in the profits of firms; to strengthen the power of an organized minority of workers to represent the interests of the disorganized in the economic sectors in which they work while affording direct legal protection of temporary workers; to provide at public expense opportunities for lifelong education in generic capabilities as well as in job-specific skills; to spread, through public as well as private means, the most advanced, experimental practices of production, preventing their concentration in isolated economic vanguards; to subsidize through the tax system the private employment and on-the-job training of the poorest and least skilled workers; and to impose direct legal restraints on the aggravation of wage and benefit inequality within firms – all these are examples of instruments that, in their combined and successive consequences can help contain extreme disparities in the returns to labor and reverse the decline of the share of labor in national income.

The democratization of economic opportunity in the United States would achieve its full effect only

within a broader program for the deepening of American democracy. This program must include the reorganization of the economic and institutional basis of voluntary action and the energizing of democratic politics.

No capacity has been more important to the success of the United States than the ability to cooperate; the antipathy of Americans to class privilege, maintained in the presence of a class structure whose force they are reluctant to acknowledge, and their faith in the power of ordinary men and women to make large problems give way to the cumulative effects of an endless flow of small solutions have helped them excel in the knack of working together under many different rules and in many different circumstances. The downward inflections of the late twentieth century, including as they did the weakening of voluntary association, have placed this great collective capacity in jeopardy.

The institutional fetishism that has always exercised so great an influence over American beliefs would have us suppose that the problem lies only in the spirit of association, not in its institutional vessel. There is, however, a problem with the vessel, and only a Left committed to institutional innovation can show how to solve it. Until they confront the inadequacies of the institutional setting of association, Americans will continue to call the spirit, and it will continue not to come.

The fiscal basis of voluntary action should be strengthened. One way to do so is to reserve part of the tax favor represented by the charitable deduction allowed to all philanthropic contributions. This reserved part should be channeled into public foundations, entirely independent of governmental influence and managed by people representative of different currents of opinion. Voluntary groups could apply to these public foundations for support as they now apply to private foundations. The rich would not be able to ride their hobbyhorses through private philanthropy without helping to open a space beyond plutocratic and governmental influence.

The social focus of voluntary action should be sharpened. No focus is more important than responsibility for taking care of those in need. The principle that every able-bodied adult should hold a position in the caring economy as well as in the production system creates an immediate challenge to civil society and to its capacity for self-organization. Society would need to organize, outside government and outside private business, to develop and apply this principle to best effect, in new forms of public service and community organization. It would be an expansion of the traditional American knack for cooperation for the sake of collective problem-solving.

The legal apparatus at the disposal of voluntary action may therefore also need to be broadened.

The traditional regime of contract and corporate law may not suffice. As an instrument of voluntary association, private law presupposes that the readiness to organize is already present. And public law sets what is done with private law within a mandatory framework, imposed from the top down according to a single formula.

The task of social law, neither private nor public, would be to incite the self-organization of society, outside both government and business, for the purpose of fulfilling responsibilities such as the responsibility of organizing people to take care of one another outside the family. For example, the law might establish a structure of neighborhood associations parallel to the structure of local government but completely independent of it. Thus, local society would be organized twice, within local government and outside it. Each of these forms of organization would bring pressure to bear against the other, neither duplicating its work nor accepting in its dealings with it a rigid division of labor.

Within such a program the reform of the basis of voluntary association would need to be complemented by the reorganization of the institutional basis of democratic politics. The cult of the Constitution is the supreme example of American institution worship. From it results the American preference for changing the Constitution by reinterpreting it rather than by

amending it, as if any emergent vision of the political needs of the people would have to lie hidden within the constitutional scheme, waiting to be revealed by brazen oracles of the law.

The American constitutional order, however, confuses by design two distinct principles: one, liberal; the other, conservative. The liberal principle is that power be fragmented: divided among different branches of government and different parts of the federal State. The conservative principle is that a table of correspondences be established between the transformative reach of a political project and the severity of the constitutional obstacles its execution must overcome. The point of the conservative principle is to slow politics down, and to tighten the dependence of change upon crisis.

To Americans the liberal and the conservative principles seem naturally and necessarily connected. They are not. It is possible to keep the former while repudiating the latter. This goal could be achieved by combining two sets of reforms. One set would be designed to raise the level of organized, sustained popular engagement in politics. The other set would be calculated to resolve impasse between the political branches of government quickly and decisively, and to do so by involving the general electorate in the resolution of the deadlock.

This second set of reforms could include, for ex-

ample, the use of comprehensive programmatic plebiscites, preceded by national debate and mutually agreed by the President and the Congress. Such innovations could also provide for the right of either of the political branches, when faced with a programmatic impasse in its relation to the other branch, to call early elections. Although initiated by one branch, the early election would always be simultaneous for both branches. Thus, the branch to exercise the right would have to pay the price of the electoral risk. By means such as these, particularly if implemented in the context of reforms raising the level of popular political mobilization, the institutional logic of Madison's scheme would be reversed. From being a machine for the slowing down of politics, it would become a machine for its acceleration. In matters of institutional design, small differences can produce large effects.

The cult of the Constitution and the widespread failure to recognize any need to quicken the tempo of politics in the absence of national emergency would work together in the United States to leave any such proposal without supporters. The place to begin in the reformation of democratic politics in America is therefore not a constitutional redesign favorable to the rapid resolution of impasse. It is the acceptance of reforms that would increase the level of civic engagement and education while diminishing plutocratic influence over politics: raising the temperature before

quicken the tempo. Some such initiatives would provide for the public financing of campaigns. Others would broaden free access, on behalf of organized social movements as well as of political parties, to the means of mass electronic communication as a condition for the award of the public licenses under which the business of television and radio is conducted.

Seen as a whole, in the combination of all its parts, such a project of redirection and transformation for the United States may seem too all-encompassing and too ambitious to withstand the test of constraint in context. Yet it is composed of elements that are almost entirely familiar. Advance in some of its parts could go very far before hitting against the limits imposed by a failure to advance in others.

This program addresses a constituency that does not yet exist: a working-class majority able to transcend in its commitments racial and religious divisions. It does not, however, take the existence of such a constituency for granted. Its formulation in thought and its promotion in practice would help bring that constituency into existence. The project helps create the base; the base allows the project to go further. In all these respects it presents problems that are not uniquely American; they are typical of the difficulties to be faced by the Left in any contemporary society, richer or poorer.

In the United States as anywhere else such a project could come to life only in the setting of a larger

contest over consciousness. In that struggle it would be necessary to challenge the American understatement of the room for institutional alternatives and the American exaggeration of the chances for private escape, through self-help and self-enhancement. Political parties and social movements are insufficient instruments in this prophetic work.

In quarreling over such beliefs we take the spirit of the nation as our object, given that the nation-state remains a privileged terrain for experiment with the common terms of life. The characteristic qualities of the American people are their energy, their ingenuity, their generosity, their practical good faith, their readiness to cooperate, and their sense that something is missing from their national and personal lives. This sense inspires their restless striving and their heart-sick longing. Their characteristic defects are their idolatrous attitude to their institutions, their failure fully to acknowledge the dependence of self-construction on social solidarity, their willingness to settle in social life for the circumstances of the middle distance, robbing them of solitude without affording them company, and their lack of imagination. They cannot realize more fully either their interests or their ideals without providing better occasions than they currently do for the willingness to cooperate and to sacrifice on which all greatness depends.