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POLITICS & THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

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Follies On The Left*

BY JIM SLEEPER

Their delight in all they saw and were told, and the expression they gave to this delight, constitute unquestionably one of the wonders of our age. There were earnest advocates of the humane killing of cattle who looked up at the massive headquarters of the Ogpu with tears of gratitude in their eyes, earnest advocates of proportional representation who eagerly assented when the necessity for a Dictatorship of the Proletariat was explained to them, earnest clergymen who walked reverently through anti-God museums . . . earnest pacifists who watched delightedly tanks rattle across Red Square . . . The almost unbelievable credulity of these mostly university-educated tourists astonished even Soviet officials used to handling foreign visitors.

—Malcolm Muggeridge describing visitors to the U.S.S.R. in the 1930's, cited in *Political Pilgrims*.

We knew too what the Vietnamese contribution to a humane socialism would be; it was evident in the unembarrassed handclasps among men, the poetry and song at the center of man-woman relationships, the freedom to weep practised by everyone . . . as the Vietnamese speak of their country . . . Here we began to understand the possibilities for a socialism of the heart.

—Tom Hayden and Staughton Lynd reporting from Hanoi, cited in *Political Pilgrims*.

Review of Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, 1928-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

There are lessons for the left in Paul Hollander's recent book, though they are not limited to the ones Hollander would teach us, and perhaps not as harsh as Susan Sontag's suggestion that the *Reader's Digest* has been a better guide to events abroad in the past twenty years than *The Nation*. Hollander does cite Sontag's gentler but no less grim reflection that

> It was not so clear to many of us as we talked about American imperialism how few options many of these countries had except for Soviet imperialism which was maybe worse . . . When I was in Cuba and North Vietnam, it was not clear to me then that they would become Soviet satellites, but history has been very cruel . . .

If even that is too strong, still there's no gainsaying Hollander's claim that the left has often been diverted across "half a century of political daydreaming" by travelling spokesmen hopelessly, perhaps willfully, naive about the exercise of power in the world. The picture *is* grim: too many of Hollander's "pilgrims" had never run anything more complicated than a college course or a weekend conference before finding themselves clinking glasses with leaders of nations. Nor is it clear how many of them had seriously tried to outgrow a politics of self-definition through moral posturing, and whether they were forcibly kept from power as much as they shrank from the moral ambiguities of learning how to wield it.

More disturbing than political immaturity, Hollander suggests, have been the pilgrims' dramatic abdications of the simplest obligations of critical intelligence, their refusal to engage even the most obvious contradictions; nor, he contends, have the pilgrims made sound political judgments on the home front. If anything, they have had in common a tendency "to be rather harsh on their own societies and surprisingly indulgent as well as uninformed about others."

And not always so well informed about their own:

> A schoolteacher from Brooklyn [visiting the Soviet Union] . . . saw a machine which did wonders with the paper that was fed to it. 'Such an amazing invention could be produced only in a country like yours, where labor is free, unexploited, and working for one end. I shall write a book about what I have seen.' She was a trifle embarrassed when she walked to the rear and saw the sign: 'Made in Brooklyn, N.Y.' (William C. White, cited in *Political Pilgrims*).

And so on: the visitors transmuted grinding poverty into ennobling sacrifice; repression into steely courage on the long march; cocktails on government verandahs with host intellectuals wearing fatigues into the perception that here, at last, principle and intelligence were integrated into the planning and building of a just society, the *polis* acknowledging its philosopher-kings.

Hollander argues that the pilgrims doubly abdicated critical responsibility and freedom, first by surrendering, as if in a "death-wish," the very exercise of criticism in their glorification of regimes which promised to dissolve feelings of estrangement and powerlessness in the massed power of the people's state; and, second, by denigrating and hence demoralizing the Western institutions which alone sustained the pilgrims' freedom. "The most heartening result [of this study]," he writes, "would be a strengthening of the critical faculties, which would ultimately lead to the curbing of the impulses and fantasies out of which political pilgrimages arise." Once we abandon the quest for utopia abroad — so the argument runs — we'll begin to appreciate and work more solicitously with what we have here at home:

> It seems to me that what has been consequential is not the perception or praise of particular countries and their political systems . . , but the cumulative impact of the denigration intellectuals direct at their own society which . . . almost invariably accompanies the veneration of other societies. . . . The forms of estrangement scrutinized in this volume are significant even if they do not always betoken clearly articulated hostility but only the passive withdrawal of support; such a withdrawal is one among many factors which reduce the vitality and capacity for survival of Western societies. . . . The question is whether or not, willingly or inadvertently, Western intellectuals will contribute to the destruction of their relatively free societies, in part because of their illusions about other societies and their recurrent fantasies of new forms of liberation and collective gratification . . .

* * *

Without question *Political Pilgrims* is a compendium of folly on the left, but even before examining it that way one is impelled to ask whether

it should be. Of course the subtitle delimits the subject, yet the author insists his agenda is broader: he would defend Western freedom against the subversions, willing and inadvertent, of Western intellectuals, and is at pains throughout the text to evoke the liberal paradigm whose core values they abandon under stress or temptation. As if to underscore his own inquiry's fidelity to those values, he characterizes the miscreants not as "socialists" or "the left" — that would be unfair, after all, both to the full meaning and record of the left and to the Western traditions the left carries forward — but disinterestedly as "Western intellectuals" or members of the "intelligentsia." Hollander makes a show, in short, of participating in the full complexity of the dilemmas his critique would raise.

And yet the specificity of his inquiry accomplishes the selection one suspects he really wants. His disclaimer that a review of the pilgrims' sorry peregrinations is only a modest contribution to a larger picture of intellectual decay begs the question of why the pilgrims' domestic grudges and distant infatuations are especially consequential among the "many factors which reduce the vitality and capacity for survival of Western societies." Hollander suggests that the pilgrims' frequent denigrations of the West are themselves a measure of intellectual dishonesty as well as a grave threat, since they weaken the only earthly dispensation offering scope to free critical intelligence. But surely to leave matters there, placing Western loyalists beyond serious reproach, is to miss everything instructive in the tragedy of the best and the brightest which taught us, painfully, that not everyone who defends Western nations' strategic and economic interests is committed to (or objectively serving) the vitality or even minimal survival of free institutions.

Consider, for example, the degree in which dubious economic priorities have created precisely the consequences Hollander bemoans. "How long will the advocates of 'good faith' in East-West economic relations remain careless of the now indisputable fact that their ideas have had quite concrete consequences in promoting the vitality and efficiency of totalitarian evil?" asked John Van Meer in the December 1982 issue of *Commentary*. Van Meer might have appeared to be echoing Hollander, yet he was not addressing socialist "pilgrims"; he was attacking the American corporate "party of commerce" and its loyal intellectual apologists, who had emerged, through their complete silence during the sixteen breathtaking months of Solidarity's struggle, as the primary supporters of Polish totalitarianism and its Soviet shield.

Hollander's apparent ignorance of the ways in which "defense" of the West can often undermine freedom in the West (and Van Meer's is of course the most tame of examples) is an intellectual failure of the first order, if not, indeed, an abdication of the critical intelligence he purports to defend.

That failure doesn't by itself invalidate the harrowing record of folly on the left, to which we now turn; but given the standards Hollander invokes to judge the pilgrims — and given his neglect of the left's critical role in defending just such standards time and again from subversion by Western loyalists at home and abroad — his work bears the unmistakable taint of selective prosecution. It's not an undertaking for the kind of intellectual he wants to defend and, presumably, to be; and that is an issue to which one must return in assessing the contribution of *Political Pilgrims*.

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Several troubling emphases and omissions mar the inquiry on its own terms — that is, as a kind of exposé of the "denigration/veneration" syndrome which Hollander feels grips the left in its shuttlings between decadent homelands of liberal oppression and the shimmering holy lands of socialist promise. In the first place, the mere fact of unreflective emotional effusion is presumed to discredit the host nation or political system; the object of the "pilgrimage" is exposed as fraudulent through a recitation of the pilgrims' characteristic foibles.

This simply will not do. Since 1948 thousands of Westerners visiting Israel — non-Jews as well as Jews, atheists as well as the faithful — have shared in nearly every sort of emotional excess, sin of critical omission, and "technique of hospitality" Hollander derides. My own impressions of the country in 1964 resonate nicely with what Hollander gives us of Susan Sontag in Cuba in 1969: "Perhaps the first thing a visitor notices is the enormous energy level. It is still common . . . for people to go without sleep, talking and working several nights a week." We are to understand that Sontag was swept up in illusion, but if so, so was I in marvelling at the vigorous Sabras — "young men and women sparkling with animal spirits," as Waldo Frank said of the Cubans — eager to engage me in conversation and to ask when I'd join them permanently in "The Land."

In 1964, the attractions of the "underdog," another of Hollander's themes, were irresistible: like George McGovern's "tiny Vietnam,"

fledgling Israel imparted to its militarized youth a poignant nobility, palpable everywhere. And as in North Vietnam, where Mary McCarthy "half wish[ed] for some real excitement, for the bombs to come a bit nearer and make a louder bang," danger deepened solidarity. I saw middle class, middle aged doctors and teachers from Brookline, Massachusetts lose themselves whooping and dancing to an accordian in an army barracks during a three-day march through occupied West Bank territories in 1972. During the Six Day War five years earlier, I watched scores of young American volunteers waiting for vaccinations at the Jewish Agency on Park Avenue, glowing with giddy serenity at the prospect of transcending at last what one of them called "this American ooze."

Despair of, if not contempt for, life in the United States was indeed a common if muted current in some American pilgrims' celebrations of Israel. On the eve of their departure from an eight-week visit, sixty high school students sat on a moonlit terrace in Jerusalem, each knotted in quiet agony, some weeping bitterly, tasting G.B. Shaw's words upon departing the Soviet Union: "Tomorrow I leave this land of hope and return to our Western countries of despair." Here in Israel the young Americans had felt needed, counted; and that knowledge would be a kind of aphrodisiac in the daily round of their lives back in the United States. They had become, in short, the kind of pilgrim who Hollander says "resembles the romantic lover in that his passions are fueled by the unattainability of the love-object, by the carefully retained obstacles to the fulfillment of his longings . . . Distance remains, and it helps to conserve the dreams." How much more apt is his emphasis on the deliberate quality of that distance in the case of Israel, where immigration is a real option, than in the case of the USSR or Vietnam, where it is not!

Undoubtedly it is the special symbiosis between Israel and the United States, Western societies both, which explains the absence of a single, solitary reference in *Political Pilgrims* to Israel and its Western pilgrims. But if Hollander really means to refine our understanding of how people transmute domestic alienation into critical surrender abroad, his omission is unfortunate. Precisely because Israel is vibrant with intellectual freedom and radically different from the various socialist holy lands — though many of its pilgrims, alas, differ not a whit from Hollander's daydreamers — , it offers some corrective lessons.

First, just as the pilgrims' effusions and over-simplifications do not make Israel itself a sham, so the follies of Western visitors to places

like Cuba do not in themselves discredit those regimes. Romantic love doesn't make its object inherently unworthy of the genuine love that may grow beyond infatuation's first flush.

Second, Israel's experience, certainly before 1967, provides a glimpse of the ahistorical distortion inevitable in Hollander's lumping together of disparate pilgrimages over half a century of dramatic change for the West. What I saw in Israel keeps me from sneering at Sontag's celebration of enormous energy and sleeplessness attending early social reconstruction. Either we were both crazy, or societies since the Paris Commune have indeed gone through these flushes of revolutionary ardor in something other than a delusionary way. Again, how these societies grow beyond childhood's excellence, and what they become under the weight of long-term burdens, are different questions. One should not fault visitors who witness glorious beginnings for reporting what they've seen.

The problem of ahistoricity is even broader. To scan the hopeful if innocent accounts of visitors to the Soviet Union before the Moscow trials — and so before the Stalin-Hitler Pact, the Holocaust, the Bomb — is to remember that the West itself was once a place where it was possible to believe with genuine goodwill that Communism held the hope of a renewed humanity. Hollander's citations only deepen one's sense that McCarthy was depraved to be hunting, in the fifties, those of the pilgrims whose faith had already been dissolved by 1939. Again the Israeli experience may not be without corrective value. Suppose there is so fundamental a shift in the judgment of history as to make untenable, morally as well as logistically, the imposition of a Jewish state over all Palestine, including Judea and Samaria, at the expense of some bi-national federation. What will be said then of pilgrims of the seventies and eighties who thought themselves loyal and true in supporting Menachem Begin's deepening intransigence? At what pass in humanity's journey will they be expected to have seen the light and to have given up their attempts to rationalize arrangements that have become tragically oppressive, morally as well as logistically indefensible? When will the "exercise of critical faculties" be deemed to have indicated a shift in course, and how wise will it be to hound as reactionaries or subversives those who failed to change in time? It is the sort of question Hollander seems to feel free to ignore in his concern for the undermining of Western vitality.

There is yet another aspect to the historical mischaracterization of developments in political consciousness which must be charged to

Hollander. Astonishingly, given his statement of general concerns, he devotes only two pages to the romantic embrace of fascism over two decades by dozens of prominent Western intellectuals. He abuses Alistair Hamilton's analysis of the similarities between fascist and communist flirtations, asserting that the pilgrims to Bavaria don't require equal scrutiny. Yet "disinterested" inquiry might learn something from the fact that it was the Western left which spoke most forcefully against the romance with fascism. Instead, Hollander practices a studied silence parallelled exactly last December by Norman Podhoretz, who sought in a *Harper's* article to make George Orwell a posthumous neo-conservative by citing one of his more fatuous remarks: "If the English people suffered for several years a real weakening of morale," Orwell wrote, "so that the fascist nations judged they were 'decadent' and that it was safe to plunge into war, the intellectual sabotage from the Left was partly responsible." What of late capitalism's role in popular decadence? What of Claud Cockburn's exhaustive documentation of the British aristocracy's and intelligentsia's insistence that Hitler was a gentleman of the West — and, of course, a reliable anti-communist? If there was moral misleadership, surely it came from those who ran the country and controlled its mass media.

* * *

Disingenuousness about the role and relative influence of the left is carried forward into the more recent American past, where Hollander sows confusion about what socialists did and did not do to strengthen Western freedom. A pivotal experience of the postwar American generation came in sharing Daniel Ellsberg's, Seymour Hersch's, *The New York Times* editorial board's, and other then-"establishment" loyalists' mounting astonishment and despair that not only did the government gratuitously murder and lie, but much of its intellectual and political leadership inhabited an Alice-in-Wonderland view of insurgencies domestic and foreign which fully merited the exegesis it got, from Burdick and Lederer's *The Ugly American* to Joan Didion's latest reports from El Salvador.

Few of these exposés were written, if you please, on behalf of socialism or communism, but in the name of an outraged liberalism of the sort Hollander might be expected to defend. The lesson of the postwar generation's experience — refined, to be sure, in the wake of an often misspent rage — was that a powerful officialdom and its

apologists stood opposed to everything it had believed decent and honorable. It was a frightening, wrenching discovery. Few who endured it felt impelled to glorify other regimes; as regards most of them, Hollander's thesis is trivial. Many did flail wildly or withdraw from politics altogether. Others smoldered and eventually refashioned a more cautious politics. Is Noam Chomsky a perfect representative of attitudes on the left? I think not, but in any case it is scandalous to blame him and other socialist intellectuals generally for weakening the nation's morale during these years of broad societal catharsis. Hollander excoriates Chomsky at length for being invidiously selective in his concern for violations of human rights around the globe (Chomsky will condemn the U.S. out of hand, Hollander says, but labor mightily to discredit condemnations of the Khmer Rouge); but *Political Pilgrims* provides only a single reference — in footnotes — to Jeane Kirkpatrick and Ernst Lefevre, and none at all to Henry Kissinger or Walter W. Rostow. The reason, apparently, is that Chomsky attacks the West while the others defend it. But it's difficult to see how our intellectual or political vitality have been served by Kirkpatrick's and Lefevre's own mighty labors to minimize the atrocities in Argentina or the crimes of Somoza, or by Rostow's rationalizations for the futile brutality of our Vietnam strategy, or by Kissinger's conduct toward Allende's Chile or his approach to domestic surveillance.

Similarly, John Kenneth Galbraith is cited ten times in this book for a glib, myopic internationalism; why are we told nothing of Milton Friedman's star-crossed evocations of the utopia in store for nations embracing his market theologies? When it comes to making "sound political judgments" and avoiding a "selective preoccupation" with some events at the expense of others equally consequential for Western freedom, Kirkpatrick, Kissinger, et al apparently do not err, since they do not appear. Yet there is nothing in Hollander's general statement of concerns to explain why this should be so.

As if these imbalances weren't troubling enough, Hollander saddles left intellectuals, by association, with the fatuous twaddle of people who can safely be considered aliens to intellectual life and its commitments. We're treated to the forgettable speculations of Jane Fonda; why not those of John Wayne? We hear from Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin quite often in this book; why not George Lincoln Rockwell or Billy Carter, who, it will be remembered, visited Libya? The only explanation is that Hollander is targeting those who debunk the West — not the West's actual and more serious failures, across the

political spectrum, to "strengthen the critical faculties." Putative defenders of the West, however irresponsible, are here irreproachable — indeed, above examination.

If the left is charged with weakening Western morale, never is it credited with defending Western freedom, sometimes by criticizing itself. In truth, the left is well-populated with thinkers who've never had any truck with political pilgrimages and who've already done much of Hollander's work for him without sparing the right and the liberal state deserved intellectual criticism.

Probably no socialist writer better exemplifies a principled resistance to political daydreaming about utopias foreign and domestic than Irving Howe, who from his early opposition to Stalin to his later criticism of the New Left has inveighed against the follies Hollander pretends to have exposed for the first time. Not so much as mentioned anywhere in the text or page footnotes of *Political Pilgrims*, Howe is cited twice in the endnotes for observations tangentially related at best to questions of political freedom and illusion. Lewis Coser, Daniel Aaron, and others who've written extensively and critically about the artistic and intellectual failings of writers on the left get a similar bum's rush from Hollander. And a dozen responsible younger left writers on these issues, from Bernard Avishai to Michael Walzer, simply don't appear.

Hollander does acknowledge, in a footnote, Rosa Luxemburg's reminder to the left that

> The elimination of democracy . . . is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the living source from which alone can come the correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions . . . Socialist democracy does not come as a sort of Christmas present for the worthy people who, in the interim, have loyally supported a handful of socialist dictators.

But he is not so quick to remind Western apologists of this same concern when they rationalize economic elitism at home or the subversion by the United States of fledgling democracies and its support for dictatorships abroad.

Nor does Hollander acknowledge the body of socialist thought in this country which, growing in a non-sectarian way from observations like Luxemburg's and borrowing, too, from the Federalist Papers, admits that liberal democracy is often stronger in practice than in Marxist theory, but which insists that civil liberties and democratic

presumptions have worn thin for Americans whose economic disenfranchisement effectively undermines any real exercise of freedom. If the work of I.F. Stone and Nat Hentoff on behalf of intellectual and civil liberty is any indication, this kind of socialism will not abandon the defense of freedom while awaiting progress in other spheres. That not enough of the left follows this example may be cause for concern and criticism, though certainly not for excoriation in the name of core liberal values which the left is presumed by its very nature to subvert or dismiss.

* * *

Let us be frank. We are long past the stage when the left can argue, from the historical record, that the core Western values find a better home in its bosom than they do in the interstices of countervailing powers in a pluralist political arrangement. The grim wisdom of the neo-conservatives has its corrective value for us. But their own intellectual pilgrimages to corporate servitude under the auspices of Irving Kristol and the American Enterprise Institute over the past ten years is quite another matter, and surely it is that particular abdication of critical intelligence which poses the greater danger to liberty in the West. It leads to such excesses as George Gilder's paean to capitalism in *Wealth and Poverty*:

> Reason and calculation, for all their appeal, can never suffice in a world where events are shaped by millions of men, acting unknowably in fathomless interplay and complexity, in the darkness of time.

In response to this sort of thing the left can recover its own corrective value, if not its historic responsibility. One of Hollander's *bêtes noires*, Herbert Marcuse, had this to say in the 1930's, for example:

> The rationalist theory is well aware of the limits of human knowledge and of rational social action, but it avoids fixing these limits too hurriedly and above all making capital out of them for the purpose of uncritically sanctioning established hierarchies.

Even in the late forties, as Stalinism swept eastern Europe, Merleau-Ponty could speak of the left's critical role in the human journey:

> The decline of proletarian humanism is not an experience which invalidates the whole of Marxism; even if it is incapable of shaping world history, it remains powerful enough to discredit other solutions. For on close consideration, Marxism is not just any hypothesis which might be replaced tomorrow by some other. It is the simple statement of those conditions without which there would neither be any humanism, in the sense of a mutual relation between men, nor any rationality in history . . . and to renounce it is to dig the grave of reason in history. After that there can be no more dreams or adventures . . . Outside of admitting the proletarian bringing man into mutuality with man, there is only the power of the few against the rest, only masters and slaves, only continued irrational history without humanity.

It is one thing to wish that the left were wiser. It is quite another to call people to account by a standard which one does not oneself observe. Hollander's willful omissions abandon the pretense of public discourse to a realm of force and fraud, where arguments are merely verbal proxies for camps warring by other means, each employing "intellectual" spokesmen to expose the other's flaws, but also to disguise flaws of its own which mirror those of the enemy. Hollander's failures — really one must pay him the minimal compliment of calling them hypocrisies, since he surely knows better — render him little more than a hit man for interests with a long and sorry record of scant regard for intellectual freedom. The left can learn from his criticism. But if it learns very much, it will not have his company.