

# Why Isn't the Left Able to Deliver?

By Jim Sleeper

Whenever I wind up toward the left end of the political spectrum, which is often enough, it's usually through some kind of deductive thinking that eliminates most of the other options along the way. Then I look at the collection of doddering fuddyduddies, pusillanimous yentas, petty thugs, artful parasites, dear lost souls and shlubby, callow youths that constitute the left and I recoil. "The honest man," wrote Turgenev, "will end by having to live alone."

That last word is important. My distaste for most of the left doesn't necessarily change my position on a given issue, much less catapult me into the arms of the right. But it does make me want to express myself differently, to reach for a community of readers perhaps more imaginary than real, though I keep hoping it's more real than imaginary.

I come from a New England town meeting tradition of *pro bono* workaholics of indeterminate political hue, so you can chalk up to crotchiness my impatience with a left in which, it seems to me, not a single person writing has ever assumed substantial responsibility for taking an institution, organization or other entity from point A to point B in the "real world." That is, has ever met a payroll or run anything more complicated than a college course or weekend conference, before traveling to Third World countries and clinking glasses with the leaders of nations and telling us how things ought to be.

That kind of pontificating without concomitant responsibility or experience requires artifice and real skill, but really it's a good deal easier and more fashionable than we like to admit. These days, writers of the left like Alexander Cockburn suffer, if at all, not for their political principles but for their deceptions, and they manage to snatch personal disgrace even from the very jaws of martyrdom, forfeiting my sympathy, at least.

Why, then, do I wind up on the left as often as I do? Elementary. My reasoning about social life proceeds from several deeply ingrained assumptions:

- That ultimately I would rather have a little less to enable others to have a little more, because I think it would make social life safer, richer and more vital, not less;

- That "there but for the grace of God go I": that, for example, my intelligence, such as it is, was not so much innate as *nurtured, invested in and rewarded*, and that, had it not been, it would have been hopelessly scrambled and submerged when I was young and vulnerable;

- That there *is* a continuity between me and the most violent and depraved of muggers and addicts, a continuity I can imagine and feel; and that even when it's eclipsed, the quality of my social and hence personal life is fatally compromised by its acceptance of desperation and suffering so extreme.

Growing up in a small New England town, I used

to think that if everyone didn't share these fundamental intuitions, at least everyone could be appealed to in these terms, in the pinch. That community outrage could be marshaled and the balance tipped toward decency in the end. That something about human nature made everyone's breast the pivot of a dialectic that turns oppression and arrogance into resistance and love. The movements of the 1960's seemed the natural social expression of these beliefs.

Today I believe something different: that a critical mass of people are not at all imbued with these values and cannot be called to account; that much of the left lacks the moral courage to admit this, to admit that its assumptions about what really moves most blacks, women and working class youths just aren't valid, and to work from that sober acknowledgment, with a revised timetable and a deeper agenda less reliant on muckraking and heroes; that too many writers on the left are just going through the motions of exhortation and expose.

Somehow, it seems to me, we have to look deeper, feel deeper and write in a whole new way, searching where the primal roots of language tap the motive wellsprings of people living in late capitalist cities like New York. Muckrakers just rake muck; then they wonder why so few are radicalized by their revelations. It's because the deeper assumptions listed above, the assumptions we used to be able to count on in people, no longer hold. How we writers bear ourselves in the face of that disaster is what interests me most.