

# LOOKING LEFT

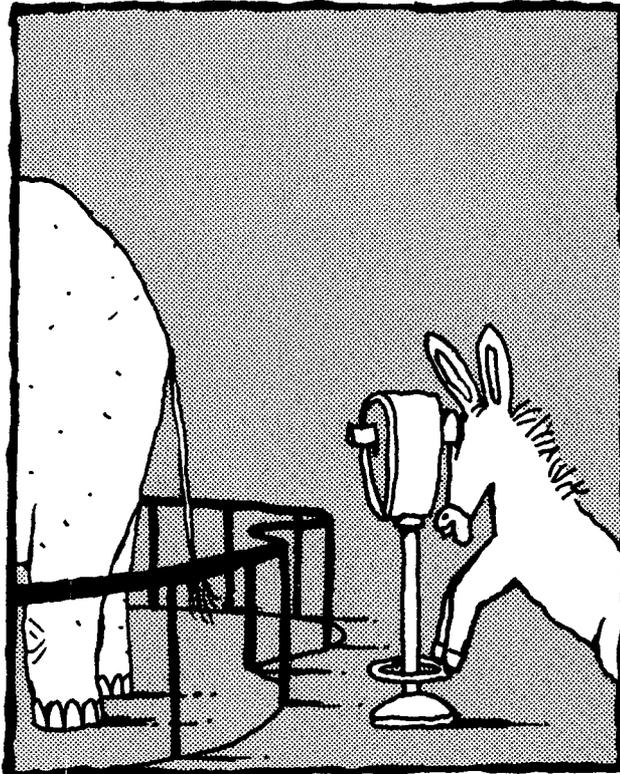
BY MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER

**I**t was the autumn of 1990, and America's liberals and leftists clamored for a place in the sun. The Republican Party was led by a man elected to be a second Ronald Reagan but whose persona was that of a kinder, gentler Richard Nixon. The economy was swan-diving into a recession, as developers, investment bankers, and savings-and-loan executives spent their days alternating between the bankruptcy courts and grand jury proceedings.

The conservative movement appeared to be splitting up. The sniping between traditionalist conservatives and their neoconservative rivals had escalated into a cold war, and fiends had burst in on Pat Buchanan and fired a round of verbal bullets at point-blank range.

In the 1990 elections, voters, when they wanted to change their leaders, preferred politicians with principles over those who believed in nothing at all. While many of these principled politicians were Republicans and some were even conservative, in a few states voters preferred liberals or leftists to a Republican nonentity. Given some victories—a governor in Oregon, a senator in Minnesota, and the first avowedly socialist congressman since the days of Harry Truman—some liberals proclaimed that their cause was resurgent.

When Robert Kuttner viewed the future in the October 29 *New Republic*, he was as enthusiastic as a child in a candy store who got to stuff his pockets with chocolate bars, Tootsie Rolls, and jelly beans. Faced with a dark and forbidding future ("winter is coming, the larder is empty, and the supply of firewood has already been burned"), Kuttner's cure was to stimulate spending by increasing taxes. If people stopped spending money on what they wanted to and were forced



to give more money to the state, said Kuttner, all would be well. After all, he said, World War II government spending ended the Great Depression!

The one admirable fact about Kuttner is that he never changes. In good times or bad, Kuttner's cure for the economy is always the same: massive government spending and punitive income tax rates. Such constancy is to be admired in our fickle world.

**M**ost of Kuttner's peers on the left aren't as stalwart in their opinions. Indeed, it's difficult to determine what the American left wants these days.

That is because the American left, like the American right, has its authoritarian and anarchistic tendencies; both Emma Goldman and Herbert Croly have their descendants among today's leftists. Since the first World War, the debate on the left has been about what tendency will predominate. Until the 1960s, most

prominent leftists, such as the writers and editors of *The New Republic*, tended to be authoritarian command-and-control social democrats. The rise of the New Left in the 1960s restored the anarchistic faction of the left to some degree of power. Today, neither side dominates. Indeed, in many cases, a leftist typically uses authoritarian and anarchistic language at the same time.

Consider the question of free speech. On the one hand, most leftists believe that recipients of National Endowment for the Arts grants have an absolute right to say and do whatever they want. On the other hand, many of these same leftists—particularly feminists, gay-rights activists, and blacks—then argue that politically incorrect speech on campuses should be severely restricted or banned.

But David Rieff, in the November *Esquire*, notes that censors on the right and censors on the left have an eerily similar agenda, as both demand "linguistic martial law." Far from being the cutting edge or the avant-garde, Rieff argues, the puritans of the left advocate the timeless American view that the country will be purified if all purportedly harmful substances or thoughts are outlawed. Rieff correctly notes that the arguments for banning "hate speech," pornography, and alcohol advertising rest on the same false assumption—that Americans "are so gullible and childish that they will follow the lead of everything they see or hear."

In a hard-hitting essay, Rieff observes that calling for restrictions on the First Amendment, rather than advancing bold and daring views, will result in "imposing one more layer of conformity and blandness in a country where conformity and blandness in politics and thought are more and more the rule. Americans need

to take stock, to argue, ridicule and defame without worrying about hurting one another's feelings."

Rieff is correct. Banning offensive speech would reduce the debate about the future of our country to the opinions offered on the op-ed page of a one-newspaper town. The best way to advance one's cause isn't to ban your opponents' arguments, but to offer *better* arguments.

**B**ut the arguments offered by liberals and leftists these days lack vigor. Consider a symposium conducted by the Institute for Policy Studies and presented in the November *Progressive*.

Inspired by a similar forum published in *Policy Review* last spring, the IPS asked 19 prominent American leftists to determine what were "the crucial foreign and domestic priorities for the progressive movement in the 1990s."

What is curious about the symposium is who the editors selected. There are no novelists, no artists, and no one from the Hollywood Left: Saul Landau is the only filmmaker represented. There is one union leader and only two politicians, Jim Hightower of Texas and Jesse Jackson. Most of the writers earn comfortable livings as professors, think tankers, and legal-services lawyers. Secure in their endowed chairs or government jobs, few of the participants have to endure the rigors of the marketplace.

Most avoid specific reforms in favor of vaguely advancing the politics of niceness. The left, says Leslie Cagan, an adviser to New York Mayor David Dinkins, should "develop organizing vehicles to challenge power in the different arenas of our lives." "Facilitate the integration of work and family," add think tankers Heidi Hartmann and Roberta Spalter-Roth. "Encourage people to take on the joys and frustrations of public engagement," urges author Frances Moore Lappé.

Gee, that's swell. But how and why should this be done? Why should people become leftists? Most of the authors, cushioned in a comforting layer of babble, won't tell us. Those who do advance an agenda use the arguments of the past. *Monthly Review* Editor Harry Magdoff,

for example, uses speeches first made by Franklin Roosevelt. Historian Howard "Ho Chi" Zinn thinks leftism is wonderful because of the eight-hour workday and the vote for women. Such nostalgia for past triumphs may comfort older leftists, but it does little to resolve the problems of our time.

The most disappointing contributors to the *Progressive's* forum are the feminists. At its best, feminism means that the virtues that made America great—hard work, independence, self-reliance—shouldn't be arbitrarily limited to a particular sex. That sort of individualist feminism isn't represented in the *Progressive* forum.

Instead, we have such comments as Rutgers University scholar Charlotte Bunch's call for a world where "progressive and feminist values" carry the day. Most of these values—"economic justice," "participatory democracy," "community responsibility for the fate of the planet"—involve considerable expansion of government power. But why should women, freed from dependence on men, see government as the solution to every problem? To replace Big Brother with the nanny state is hardly an advance.

**N**one of the *Progressive* contributors makes a case for advancing socialism. The best prosocialist argument I've read recently is made by British political scientist Alan Ryan in the fall issue of *Dissent*.

With the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe, Ryan observes, it is "an odd time to be thinking about socialism in the 1990s and in the West." Indeed, Ryan admits that most of the old Marxist arguments have to be tossed on the rubbish heap of history. The proletariat doesn't exist; most revolutionaries have failed; and most of Marx's economic arguments, particularly his calls for central planning, are, in Ryan's view, misguided. Even the socialist arguments derived from altruism, Ryan admits, won't work any more. Most people would rather give to their church or to the March of Dimes than sacrifice their life or their incomes to people they don't know.

Why be a socialist? Ryan gives three arguments. First, the market won't provide "public goods"—a lighthouse, or a clean river. Second, socialism restores a sense of community—in an ideal socialist world, "one's ideas and aspirations are taken as seriously as anyone else's." Third, a socialist world limits the destructive possibilities Ryan considers inherent in capitalism. In the capitalist world, Ryan argues, most businesses fail, including "ninety-nine out of every hundred new novelists and pop groups." In Ryan's socialist system, planners would advise these would-be entrepreneurs to find more fruitful lines of work.

But most "public goods," when given a market or a market-like mechanism, are produced. When businesses are given the incentive to reduce pollution through credits or licenses, for example, they are more likely to reduce waste than businesses that are severely regulated. As for "creative destruction," not every artist succeeds.

But consider the dismal record of the National Endowment for the Arts, where grants are typically awarded, not because of merit, but because an artist has pals who hand out the cash. What's more noble—succeeding as an artist because you produce books people want to read or because you went to the right schools? Socialist societies, as an examination of Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union or Harold Wilson's Great Britain will show, are less likely to advance social mobility than their capitalist counterparts.

As for Ryan's second point, it would be a major advance if the puritans on the left and their counterparts on the right would stop seeing the other side as devils whom they must silence. The left and the right don't talk to each other enough; if they did, they might find that their foes, however misguided, are neither beasts nor demons, but people very much like themselves. As H.L. Mencken once noted, a combatant in the political arena should always realize that "his opponent is as decent a man as he is, and just as honest—and perhaps, after all, right."

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# BLACK BOOKS

BY STEVEN CARLSON

From the late 1970s until the Romanian revolution in December 1989, János Arany drove from Budapest to Romania every two weeks with books for his friends and acquaintances. Arany is a "Transylvania freak," part of a loose network that helps Hungarian intellectuals in Romania stay in contact with the outside world.

Today Arany continues smuggling books, though not as often. Restrictions on the flow of information have supposedly been lifted, but Hungarians bringing books into Romania still encounter problems with border guards. ("János Arany," by the way, is a pseudonym.)

András Schumiczky of the Hungarian Maltese Cross, which organizes transportation of most of the aid to Romania, reports that "officially one can take anything." But he says there have been "disturbances": Some of the trucks have been sent back from the border because of unexpected paperwork, and delays can vary from minutes to hours to days. (Even before the revolution, the scrutiny of the border guards differed from county to county, depending on the attitudes of local officials.)

János Arakovács, founder and director of the Hungarian Press of Transylvania, believes that regardless of what the government says, the Romanian border policy hasn't changed since the revolution. And like many Hungarians (and Romanians), he objects to the use of the term *revolution*. "The leadership has changed, but the structures have remained intact," says Arakovács, who emigrated from Romania in 1983.

The book smugglers have been active ever since the late '70s, when the Ceausescu regime tightened its control of



information. The government was especially suspicious of the ethnically mixed population in Romanian Transylvania, just across the southeastern border of Hungary. Officials put Hungarian histories, maps, and travel guides at the top of the list of banned materials, along with Bibles and religious works. Hungarians traveling into Romania even had to surrender newspapers and magazines.

In the 1980s, the Hungarian National Library began donating books to the smugglers and giving Romanian travelers certificates to use for purchases from Hungarian book stores. An employee of the library, Arany is part of an army of smugglers that developed from contacts between churches, relatives, friends, and professional colleagues on both sides of the border.

"We played a continuous game with the Romanian border guards," Arany says. "As they found our favorite hiding places, we had to find new ones." The

guards sent the smugglers they caught back to Hungary with stamps in their passports forbidding entry to Romania. Ferenc Zöld, director of the State Book Publishers' Association, smiles sheepishly as he recalls that he earned the distinction of being banned from Romania back in 1979.

After Ceausescu was overthrown, many of the cars that drove across the border from Hungary were carrying books as well as food, clothing, and medical supplies. Zöld, one of many Hungarians with relatives in Transylvania, helped organize a collection of books. The member publishing houses of his association donated materials valued at more than 65 million forints (about \$1 million).

"We asked ourselves, what do they need the most?" says Péter Zászkaliczky, pastor of the Deák Square evangelical church in Budapest. The church managed to send some 200,000 Hungarian-language volumes, including literary, religious, popular, educational, and children's books. As I write, the church expects to send four more trucks across the border in the coming months.

"The work our church did after the revolution was really insignificant," Zászkaliczky insists. "Many Hungarians participated privately in such actions, and together it amounted to a monumental effort."

And yet Arakovács notes that the letter of the law hasn't changed. A month after the December revolution, he was with M.G. Tamás, a philosopher who emigrated from Romania in 1978 and was elected to the Hungarian Parliament as a Free Democrat last spring. The two were visiting Tamás's original home in Kolozsvár (Cluj). Tamás tried to take 10