

Book Reviews

Democracy and Social Reform

Marvin Kohl

Revolution, Reform, and Social Justice, by Sidney Hook (New York University Press, New York, 1975), 307 pp., \$13.75.

Professor Hook's new book, a collection of twelve essays, may be described both as a critique of major ideologies of violence and as a pragmatic theory of democratic social reform. The first three essays are concerned, in the main, with the so-called second coming of Karl Marx and with whether or not the theoretical tenets of Marxism are true. Hook argues that the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* and *Grundrisse* are best considered as unfinished, groping efforts, as works rightfully rejected by Marx and more knowledgeable critics. He also maintains that if contemporary Marxism is the belief that human beings can be liberated from the burden of all social evils merely by the socialization of the means of economic production, achieved by a social revolution based on the working class, it is a triple myth—a myth made more dangerous because, given the blind faith of most of its advocates, it is generally held in spite of evidence and is generally not refuted by any tests of experience.

Most sociopolitical doctrines may be evaluated by asking two questions: "Are its theoretical tenets true?" and "Is its practical policy likely to increase or decrease human happiness?" Having answered the first question in the first three essays, in the negative, the next six essays, dealing with the rationale of revolution and the ideology of violence, allow Hook to answer the second question. His analysis is penetratingly honest, often brilliant, and required reading for all those who claim to be responsible social reformers. Hook maintains that "force is necessary to sustain or enforce legal rights wherever they are threatened—and human

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rights, too, which have a moral authority of their own to justify them. Otherwise they are no more than aspirations or pious hopes." However, there is an important difference between force and violence. *Violence* is usually taken to mean the exertion of any physical force so as to injure or abuse another. In contrast, Hook argues that "violence is not physical force *simpliciter* but the 'illegal' or 'immoral' use of physical force." He then claims that it is only permissible when there is no means of remedying grievances by peaceful constitutional change. In other words, the democrat may not use violence against a democratic system, since "the faith of the democrat is that the evils of a democracy—and it has many evils—can be remedied by the patient efforts to achieve a better democracy."

In the last three essays, the author, in greater detail, gives his own views about the role of protest, the position of human rights, and the nature of social justice in a democracy. According to Hook, there are human rights that, among other things, serve as a criterion for what should or should not be the basic legal rights enforced by the state. Human rights, no matter how carefully specified, sometimes conflict with each other, and in any given situation our choice of which way to go is ultimately justified by personal and social utility in furthering human happiness. "Where there exists sufficient affluence to distribute to those in want, justice as well as prudence requires that their basic needs be met, independently of merit or desert." But where there does not exist more than enough of everything in the way of desirable goods, services, and opportunities, there must be "an equality of concern for all persons within the community to develop themselves to the full reach of their powers." Once we have established this equality of concern—which is the cardinal ethical belief of democracy as a way of life—then "what is wrong is not inequality of treatment but unwarranted or unreasonable inequality."

Hook certainly is correct in saying that wisdom requires giving up the quest for absolutely equal distribution. The pursuit of this will-o'-the-wisp and the persistent refusal to settle for anything less may very well lead (as Hook wisely recognizes) "to wrecking the possibilities of getting more and better results here and now." Yet, even with this admitted, it is one thing to give up the quest for absolute justice and still another to settle for the notion of "an equality of concern." After all, what does equality of concern actually come down to?

Anyone who is generally sympathetic to Hook's position, but inclined to think that the cardinal ethical belief of democracy requires more than equality of concern, may find food for thought in the following sug-

gestion. Perhaps a commitment to the politics and ethics of democracy ought to rest on the freely given consent of the governed, where the governed recognize the rights to life, liberty, and happiness as *moral thresholds*, and where their politics also reflect an ideal, namely, an equality of concern for all persons within the community to achieve excellence or to develop themselves to the full reach of their powers.

Though Hook is naturally interested in and vigorously defends human rights, his opposition to the use or threat of violence in a democracy makes him at times not fully cognizant of the fact that what he has to say is not applicable when it comes to serious violations of the right to life and the threat of violence to help correct that right's abuse. I take it he would agree that, when a society capable of providing minimal subsistence and health care does not do so because of essentially ideological or purported moral reasons, it violates the rights of any of its members affected by that decision. This is based—but not solely—upon the general recognition that to knowingly allow people to suffer or die from lack of proper diet, basic and vital health treatment, or the like, when this could have been reasonably avoided (and to say that this is fully consistent with even the *prima facie* right to life), is to make a hollow mockery of that right. If this is the case, and if it is also true that a serious violation of the right to life (unlike, perhaps, violations of liberty) is not correctable at a later date, then the right to life not only has a unique moral primacy but warrants the use of violence if that proves necessary in certain circumstances. Thus, neither justice nor prudence seems to warrant our telling a man whose right to life is being unfairly and seriously violated that he ought to be patient; that he should, after exhausting all the relevant nonviolent means, bide his time in the hope that a better society ultimately will triumph. Nor, it seems to me, can we rightfully say this to a man trying to save the life of an innocent child or some other loved one.

I am familiar with the argument that what wisdom forbids morality cannot require. Doubtless there is such a thing as unwise emphasis on individual rights, as opposed to emphasis on the common good, but how would this apply here? Hook, if I correctly recall his debate with Russell on the question of nuclear disarmament, argued that a major advantage of the nonpacifist is that, once the enemy knows you will fight, you have a considerably better chance of not being abused. It is a great mistake to suppose that this is not also true in the field of human rights; that, especially in a democratic and highly affluent society, you have a considerably better chance of not having fundamental rights violated if it is generally

known that you are prepared to fight in their defense.

It would be absurd to charge Hook with being altogether insensitive to the value of ideological belief. But the present essays do not seem to appreciate the importance of a system of beliefs that communities resort to, regardless of their truth, because they satisfy a need, usually a deep human need. It is not enough to say that Marxism is a false theory. Nor is it sufficient to argue that ideologies of violence are not ultimately conducive to an increase of personal and general happiness, if that happiness, in addition to the usual listing of basic needs and correlate interests, also requires a new philosophy *and* a shared sense of national or cosmic purpose. It is, of course, neither necessary nor at all desirable that an ideology contain false beliefs. Yet, in light of the enormous success of religious and Marxist ideologies, it does seem necessary that they contain more than true belief, that they formulate adequate ideals or goals, goals other than the absolute value of intelligence or the perpetual motion of removing immediate evils. For, by being relatively content with the removal of immediate evils as they arise in problematic social situations, Hook leaves himself open not only to the Marxist charge that liberalism is, in essence, nothing more than a manifestation of petty-bourgeois selfishness but also to the more formidable charge that democracy is, or is quickly becoming, a moral chameleon. In short, I take the lack of ideology, in the form of an adequate and relatively stable theoretic guide to a meaningful and/or good life, to be the Achilles heel of present-day democratic humanism.

I do not wish to deny the importance of the method of intelligence or the value of democracy. On the contrary, critical inquiry is necessary, and I believe the democratic way of life is one of the greatest of political goods. I am arguing only that this political stance, necessary as it is, will not alone suffice for ideological or ethical ends; that among the causes of social justice and unhappiness there are others that go deeper into the roots of human nature; that if democracy is under attack because it has estranged itself from the basic values that make life meaningful and hold society together, then a good (nay even great) intellectual offense may no longer be the best defense of democracy.

With all this said, it must not be forgotten that Hook has rendered an inestimable service in describing the liberal faith in democracy. His tireless fidelity to freedom and fearless opposition to all forms of totalitarianism clearly mark him as one of the great social and intellectual heroes of twentieth-century liberalism. In a time when man seems to have a mania for destroying valuable institutions, Professor Hook reminds us that a rational man ought to love democracy and that only a fool destroys something he loves because it is imperfect.