

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Dangerous Place.* By Daniel Patrick Moynihan with Suzanne Weaver, Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1978, pp. 297, \$12.50.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan has been very busy for the past several years as US Ambassador to India and the UN and, most recently, as junior Senator from the State of New York. Yet somehow Mr. Moynihan, with the help of Suzanne Weaver, has found time to write a book about his experiences in foreign affairs. Called *A Dangerous Place*, it is clearly a work written in some haste, in bits and snatches, drawing heavily on old notes and speeches. It consists of a series of somewhat disconnected thoughts, anecdotes, and observations centering around Mr. Moynihan's brief term at the UN. The particular flavor of the book comes from its mixture of journalistic history and reflection. What comes across vividly is the inextricable connection between principle and policy, between ideas and events. By placing his thoughts in the concrete setting of his UN ambassadorship, Mr. Moynihan enlivens the play of ideas and, hopefully, gives them a broader audience than might be had by a more organized but duller treatise. For all those interested in American foreign policy, and especially in the importance of ideas and intellectual trends in the making of foreign policy, Mr. Moynihan has given us a thought-provoking work.

While following the thread of Moynihan's argument is not easy, it is well worth trying to reconstruct his thesis. On one level, the account centers around the emergence of human rights as an issue of American foreign policy. In the spring of 1975, at a time of grave setbacks to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's most cherished plans in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, Mr. Moynihan was sent to the UN to raise human rights and related themes before an increasingly anti-Western, anti-American majority of Third World and communist states. To Secretary Kissinger, the "Western values" of human rights, political freedom, humanitarian practices, respect for law and protection of minorities had potential as winning issues for a country seemingly reluctant to use its more tangible powers. Yet these were not the sort of themes that many Americans were eager to publicly espouse. American guilt over Vietnam, over its ill-gotten wealth, over its heritage of racism, over its environmental excesses was the order of the day. Claims of American moral superiority were treated

with amused contempt and indifference by the American political and cultural elite. In this climate, Moynihan's outspoken defense of "Western" values stood out sharply.

What was the source of this "diminishment of liberal conviction, a decline possibly in energy which brought about almost an aversion to ideological struggle"? The underlying task of *A Dangerous Place* is the diagnosis and treatment of this disease of modern liberalism, particularly as it manifests itself in foreign affairs. Though the cure propounded by Mr. Moynihan has become more popular in the last few years under the unlovely name of neo-conservatism, in *A Dangerous Place* we are provided not with the stilted formulations of a political creed, but with the vigorous forging of that creed.

The charge against modern liberalism is that it has "lost its nerve." In other words, it is no longer willing to stand for anything, to defend itself against attack, or to distinguish between blatant wrong-doing and justifiable behavior. Classical 19th century European liberalism "had assumed that people behave reasonably," that is, by rational expectation of future rewards and punishments. Increasingly, however, under the influence of Freud and Marx, liberals became persuaded that behavior was not rational, but was instead pre-determined. Liberalism moved from a utilitarian to a therapeutic ethic, with disastrous results. As various individuals and interest groups pressed their claims, liberal opinion allowed any claim, and any action in support of these claims, on the grounds that the fault lay not in the claimants but in "society" or "circumstance" — in fact, with themselves, the liberal-democratic West and all its institutions. Emboldened by lack of resistance, domestic radicals such as the Students for a Democratic Society and the Black Panthers intimidated guilt-ridden college administrators, while the poor nations of the Third World made ever more extreme demands on the West. Expropriation of foreign interests was justified as compensation for past "exploitation"; proposals for lowering birth rates were treated with outraged cries of "imperialism" and "genocide."

Modern liberalism had "lost a sense of limits." It had come to think of itself as a universal and omnipotent doctrine. Its avowed goals — social equality, economic growth, self-determination — were understood to be accepted by all. To be sure, fascism had been anti-liberal; it had in due course been defeated. Yet, the realization that liberalism could have enemies on the Left, and not only on the Right, was not easily reached. Liberals deluded themselves as to the nature of their opposition. In fact, they came to believe that there was no opposition; there were no disagreements about principles or ends, only misunderstandings.

Liberalism could not cope with the fact that the modern world was not growing closer together but "that something closer to regression [had] been taking place, that the world [had] been relapsing into the timeless mode of tribal

fragmentation and strife; that in man's future lay anarchy, not dominion." On one level this lack of realization made modern liberalism susceptible to a vulgarized version of socialist economics. The preferred vision was of a "co-operative commonwealth rather than a competitive one." Redistribution of existing wealth, "North-South transfers," rather than wealth-creation, came to be seen as the solution to the Third World's economic problems. On another level, a distinguishing feature of liberalism came to be its non-ideological character. Failing to recognize the existence of significant differences of principle, liberal elites refused to engage in serious debate over principles or ideological positions. Attacks on democracy, on human rights, and on American and "Western" values, whether emanating from communist countries or from radical and anti-Western regimes of the Third World, were not taken seriously. The condescending response was that when such countries "grew up," polite discussions about tariff barriers would replace charges of racism, imperialism, and exploitation.

Moynihan tells us how, soon after coming to the UN, he circulated among his staff an essay by Irving Kristol, which claimed that the State Department itself was very much a non-ideological institution, one which never fully appreciated the ways in which words and ideas ultimately shaped world politics. There was a pervasive official uneasiness with any sort of public debate such as took place at the UN. "Serious" negotiations over issues affecting national security should take place quietly and in private; there was no point in making a fuss about the unceasing public attacks on the US and its allies.

The nature of these attacks, simply put, was opposition to liberal democracy. "The UN has become a locus of general assault by the majority of the nations in the world on the principles of liberal democracy, which are now found only in a minority of nations." The core of liberal democracy is the claim that the individual is more important than the collective; that the individual has interests and rights that can legitimately be distinguished from those of the state. By contrast, the language of the opposition "was the language of a wholly politicized world, of a permanently mobilized society in which all interests were subservient to and ultimately placed in the service of the political objectives of the state and the 'New International Economic Order,' or whatever."

In his main speech during the debate over the charge that "Zionism is racism," the most important issue of Moynihan's UN career, he defended human rights by connecting them with liberal democracy. Drawing on the thought of the political philosopher Leo Strauss, he told us that we must remember — as modern liberals have not — that the idea of human rights is fragile. It stands or falls by the distinction between the individual and the collective, a distinction made by Western political and social theorists of the 17th and 18th centuries and embodied in the constitutional and parliamentary regimes of the late 18th and 19th centuries. It has, according to Moynihan, no

place in contemporary philosophies, such as Marxism, existentialism, or positivism. "If we destroy the words that were given to us by past centuries, we will not have words to replace them, for philosophy today has no such words."

The very existence of the new states of the Third World is inconceivable without such ideas. The notion of self-determination, under the rubric of which the colonial powers gave up their empires and the new nations arose, is a liberal democratic one. The constitutions and legal charters of the world's nations and of its multinational organizations derive from the same source, as do the standards of public political discourse. Even those most opposed to liberal democracy are forced to criticize it by using its terms. The tactic of these critics is to indict liberalism for being insufficiently liberal — for not doing enough to combat racial discrimination, political suppression, or the problems of the poor.

When made by the Soviet Union and other totalitarian regimes, such charges can be discounted as "propaganda." Although Moynihan admits that, in many instances, the Third World nations are moved by the same anti-democratic animus that moves the Soviets, he believes that there is the possibility of "an accommodating relationship at the level of principle" with the Third World because their underlying attitudes have a common source: British socialism. In a 1975 article in *Commentary* entitled "The U.S. in Opposition," he identifies three world "blocs," the result of three "revolutions": the American/French or liberal revolution; the Russian or totalitarian revolution; and the British or socialist revolution. Many of the world's new states are former British colonies; almost all of them have come into existence at a time when British socialism was a dominant intellectual and political force. Its distinguishing features are an anti-Western, certainly an anti-capitalist, outlook; state ownership of principal industries and services; and a commitment to social equality and welfare. Although hostile to the West and particularly to the US, countries espousing such views share enough common ground that it is profitable for the US to go into "opposition" and seek to affect their policies by espousing free enterprise and civil liberties.

Perhaps some of Moynihan's optimism with regard to socialism is related to his own intellectual experience. As he describes it, his view of socialism stems from several years spent at the London School of Economics in the 1950's, a school founded by the Fabians and the intellectual center of English socialism. Somewhat strangely, however, Moynihan came under the influence of the distinguished conservative political theorist Michael Oakeshott, and "was thus introduced, earlier than most, to the fact that the socialist idea had spent itself as an economic doctrine. What remained, scarcely distinguishable from 19th-century liberalism, was the impulse to decency of which Orwell had written. By some law of compensation this came to seem to me even more important. I had left Britain dismayed by socialism and devoted to socialists." Moynihan's

preferred allies, then, are on the democratic left. These people, unlike the centrist liberals, are aware of the ideological dimension of politics, above all of the profound difference between liberal democratic and totalitarian regimes and the necessity to defend liberal democracy against its ideological opponents.

Moynihan's "devotion" to socialists reflects his admiration of those who recognize that liberty is more important than the fashionable egalitarian and economic values of modern liberals. There is, however, a major problem with Moynihan's position. The commitment to liberty, and perhaps more importantly the willingness to defend it, are not inherent in socialism. Socialism is a product of what Moynihan, drawing again on Leo Strauss, calls the "Modern Project." This project, to quote Strauss, looks towards "a society consisting of equal nations, each consisting of free and equal men and women, with all those nations to be fully developed as regards their power of production, thanks to science." Both classical liberalism and democratic socialism agreed on these ends. But the universalistic and tolerant outlook characteristic of Modernity has always had difficulty sustaining the vigorous support of its members, even of those who benefited from it most directly. A fragmented, competitive, increasingly atomized polity, taught to believe that individual gratification takes precedence over moral commitment and self-restraint, has continued to live off the "moral capital," largely religious, of pre-Modern society. Orwell's "commitment to decency" is not a result of socialism, but exists, where it does exist, in spite of it.

Moynihan believes, however, that the cheerful utilitarianism of classical liberalism is also insufficient to defend Western values. His own foundation, his own appeal, is moral. He warns us above all against "men who know too much to believe anything in particular and opt instead for accommodations of reasonableness and urbanity that drain our world of moral purpose." He put it most forcefully in a telegram to his UN predecessor, John Scali, about Cuban charges that the US was "oppressing" Puerto Rico:

What drove me to despair was the complacency of our putative allies in this matter. The honor of American democracy was being impugned. What is honor? said our allies. Let us talk of malaria eradication. . . . What has come over us? Forget about a slander on our honor? What have we become? . . . They should be told that Americans take the honor of their democracy most seriously, and never issue warnings to those who would besmirch that honor. . . .

"Honor" is not a word that comes naturally to the lips of social democrats, or even 19th century liberals. If it is essential to the survival of American democracy that a sense of honor be restored to the position it once held in human affairs, then the aid of the conservatives may be of greater value than that of socialists. It seems to this reviewer that the modern, socialistic goal of

liberty and prosperity is not attainable without the pre-modern, conservative spirit of sacrifice, honor, and moral resolution.

*A Dangerous Place* is filled with Moynihan's friends and foes. He makes short shrift of various fools and derelicts. For the Soviet Union's Yakov Malik, "prevaricator-at-large," he has nothing but contempt. We are introduced to Adb-el Rahman Khane of Algeria, the Director-General of the UN Industrial Development Organization who has never heard of Calcutta, and to Radha Krishna Ramphul of Mauritius — "'No fool like a Ramphul,' George Bush used to say."

Toward his friends and supporters Moynihan is generous with his praise and acknowledgments. The reader, who might have thought Moynihan a lonely outcast on the political and intellectual scene, soon realizes that many share his views: Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*; Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP; Leonard Garment, Daniel Bell, and Irving Kristol among others.

By far the most significant actor in the book is Henry Kissinger, toward whom Moynihan is highly ambivalent. He acknowledges Kissinger's position in world diplomacy, unlike that of anyone since Metternich: ". . . a reputation altogether deserved." Yet, Kissinger became Moynihan's greatest enemy for two reasons. As a colleague in government Kissinger was a constant threat: "His problem was that he was dangerous to be close to. . . . With Kissinger the risk was to end up destroyed. He could not help this." Kissinger played Metternich not only to foreigners but also to his own bureaucracy and colleagues. Moynihan's descriptions of Kissinger's tactics are highly revealing and help to explain his own eventual resignation.

More importantly, though, Kissinger is Moynihan's preeminent intellectual opponent. Moynihan, as we have seen, while not entirely optimistic about the survival of American and Western society, has certain hopes. Above all, he believes that the American people, in contrast to the political elites, are ready and willing to sustain an assertive and ideological foreign policy. The overwhelming public support for his activities at the UN provided him with confidence in the people's judgment and will power. More fundamentally, Moynihan's moral stance does not permit him to accommodate to the "enemy"; he is prepared to go down with the ship rather than sacrifice essential principles or bargain for a little more time.

Kissinger, by contrast, is portrayed as deeply pessimistic. Vietnam, OPEC, and Watergate had shattered the nerve of American democracy, which could therefore not be counted on to make the extreme sacrifices necessary for its own survival. Whereas Moynihan advocates a human rights offensive, Kissinger's response was "detente." His aim was to negotiate a "decent interval" for the West. The desire not to antagonize the Soviets and their Third World allies

. . . drew its inspiration more from a sense of democratic weakness than of

totalitarian strength. It was a form of disguised retreat, carried forward in a rapture of exalted dissimulation by persons whose assumption was that the American people would not face reality.

The 1976 elections were won not by Ford and Kissinger, fresh from Helsinki, but by Jimmy Carter, who spoke of a foreign policy based on "human rights." But Moynihan's victory has been more apparent than real: "The failure of nerve so evident in the old administration carried over into the new one." Carter's inability to comprehend the nature of "human rights" and the effort needed to turn it into an effective policy is amply demonstrated by the present occupant of Moynihan's former UN position.

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