The Liberal Dilemma: Social Rights, Civil Rights and the Cold War in "Vital Center" Liberalism

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American liberalism is usually defined as pragmatic and flexible, as a "protean" set of assumptions and orientations that constantly change according to the dynamic of American society and culture as well as the domestic and international political context.[1] Likewise, the political fortunes of American liberalism have been subject to constant, dramatic change. What Lionel Trilling had celebrated in 1950 as "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition"[2] in America was in fact quite rapidly undermined by the domestic turmoil and international crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since the 1980s, and especially since the presidential campaign of 1988, the "L-word" has come to label a failed political culture and an untenable political agenda: tax-and-spend policies implemented by inefficient big government, softness on national security and moral relativism. In 1998, Michael Ignatieff commented on the paradox of liberalism, which still inspired institutions and policies shaping the life of millions of Americans and yet remained "the politics that dares not speak its name."[3]

Recent developments have apparently signaled yet another turn in the orientations of ordinary Americans and, to some extent, in the political discourse. While still a presidential candidate under scrutiny for his supposedly ultra-liberal credentials, Barack Obama was careful not to associate himself with the dreadful L-word. In fact, in his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which marked his rise to national prominence, he had implicitly distanced himself from its divisive implications: "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America – there is the United States of America." Later, he transcended it as a thing of the past: "A lot of these old labels don't apply anymore."[4] At the same time, however, public-opinion surveys and, more importantly, election results have shown that an increasing number of Americans, especially among the young and highly educated, hold views that can be defined as distinctively liberal on issues like the role of the federal government, social justice and race. According to polls, in early 1981, 54 percent of Americans believed that there was "too much regulation of business and industry," while 18 percent thought that there was too little of it. However, in the fall of

2008, the number of those who complained there was "too little" regulation climbed to 45 percent. Other surveys show that even before the recent financial crisis a vast majority of Americans favored a more assertive role for the federal government on issues like healthcare and the environment.[5] Interestingly, conservative critics have attacked the economic policies of the Obama administration as "socialist," as though "liberal" has lost the derogatory punch it once had, while commentators that are more sympathetic hail "liberalism's moment."[6]

At a time when the current discussion on liberalism seems to have lost at least some of the ideological fury of previous years, it is perhaps less difficult to assess how liberalism affected the notion and practice of social justice in postwar America. This essay addresses how postwar liberalism envisioned social rights by focusing on one aspect in particular: the social dimension of civil rights. In other words, how did the political culture of postwar liberalism approach the part of political space where social and civil rights overlap? This is a discussion of ideas, rather than policies implemented by the federal government or court decisions on this issue. It is an attempt to clarify how and to what extent the peculiar brand of liberalism that came of age in the Cold War years dealt with civil rights as part of the larger issue of social justice in America. Indeed, it is to be argued that one must take the international dimension of American politics in the early Cold War years into consideration to see how postwar liberalism understood racial and economic justice as interrelated issues, yet also helped create a political context that made it impossible to tackle them effectively.

The contours of such liberalism were crystallized sixty years ago by historian and public intellectual Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his notorious *The Vital Center* (1949), a widely influential synthesis of the theoretical grounds, historical context and political agenda facing mainstream liberal, anti-communist America in the early Cold War years. To what extent Schlesinger actually embodied the liberal "consensus" of those years is probably less obvious than most commentators might think, as will be argued shortly. However, one assumes Schlesinger's work as public voice and behind-the-scenes insider to be relevant for understanding the potential and the contradictions of the political culture of American postwar liberalism. Therefore, for the sake of clarity and at the cost of oversimplification, "postwar liberalism" and "vital center liberalism" will be considered synonymous in this essay.

Civil Rights and Social Rights in the 1940s

In his groundbreaking study of race relations in America, Gunnar Myrdal made it clear that the "American dilemma" over race entailed not only a moral dimension, but also an economic and social one. Discrimination was untenable because not only was it "evil"

– and politically costly in the morally charged context of the Cold War – but also because it denied equal opportunities, a tenet of the American creed.[7]

Myrdal's work did not appear in a vacuum. The early 1940s were a critical time for race relations in America, as African Americans played a major role in the war effort both at home and abroad. Even before U.S. entry into World War II, the expansion of the industrial sector due to war mobilization opened new opportunities to black workers and made racial discrimination in the workplace an issue in national politics. Historians have often studied the labor movement and the civil rights movement as two distinct quests for social change; others argue that the latter originated in 1954 with the groundbreaking Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which opened the way to desegregation in the southern states. However, studies on the origins of the civil rights movement have stressed that unions and the workplace played a crucial role in the mobilization of African Americans during and after World War II. In fact, historian Nelson Lichtenstein has argued that the importance of labor to the civil rights movement of the 1940s is comparable to the importance of religion to that of the 1960s: "the mobilization of the black working class in the 1940s [made] civil rights an issue that could not be ignored by union officers, white executives, or government officials."[8]

Black leaders like A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters were aware that race and class were interrelated, and that fights for civil rights and economic justice might benefit from each other: "The Labor Movement," he remarked in 1944 "offers to the Negro and all minorities the greatest hope and promise of freedom and democracy." Randolph's notorious threat to march on Washington in 1941, while America was building up its "arsenal for democracy" against the racist ideology of the Axis powers, was a crucial moment of the wartime change in race relations in America. In order to avert a potentially disastrous race-based domestic conflict, Roosevelt agreed to establish the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), a body designed to end discrimination on racial, ethnic and religious grounds in companies with government contracts. The creation, shortcomings and legacy of the FEPC are an indicator of broader trends at work in American politics and society, as they exemplify the interplay between changing liberal notions of racial justice and social reform, the constraints of domestic politics and the pressure of the international context.

Due to congressional opposition and the president's lukewarm support, the FEPC suffered from chronic under-funding and lack of enforcement powers until its demise in 1946. Southern Democrats in Congress opposed its egalitarianism, while northern Republicans saw it as an infringement of the freedom of enterprise, which was regaining its respectability after the Depression. However, despite these limitations, significant progress was achieved in terms of blue-collar jobs for blacks migrating from the South thanks to the work of what Eric Foner has defined "the first federal agency since Reconstruction to campaign for equal opportunity for black Americans."[9] Notwithstanding vigorous

support by a wide array of forces – radicals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson as well as mainstream organizations like the NAACP and liberal voices like Eleanor Roosevelt – the Senate dissolved the FEPC in 1946. Likewise, in 1948, Harry Truman called for a permanent FEPC as part of a civil rights package inspired by the recommendations of his Commission on Civil Rights, but Congress blocked the proposal again. However, both the work of the FEPC and the campaign for its empowerment throughout the 1940s helped forge what has been defined a "labor-based civil rights movement,"[10] i.e. a coalition of activists from labor, civil rights and religious organizations, which would have a lasting impact on the quest for civil rights in postwar America.

Support for the FEPC was growing at a time when relevant parts of white America were coming to terms with the "American dilemma." Given that federal controls and legislation against discrimination in the workplace were part and parcel of New Deal liberalism, it is interesting to see how liberals reacted to this quest for racial and economic justice emerging from the unprecedented activism of black Americans. In fact, much has been written on the transition from the emphasis on the economic dimension that was typical of the New Deal to the "rights-based" approach of postwar liberalism. Events overseas played an important role in this transition. First, the rise of Nazism and the spread of racist policies across Europe led American liberals to address the issues of race, ethnicity and immigration with specific policies, rather than as a byproduct of the fight against economic injustice. Later, with the rise of the Soviet Union as a world power and the worldwide appeal of communism, discussing the issues of class and distribution of property became very controversial in American public discourse, which had been considerably narrowed by anti-communist rhetoric and legislation. Racial justice came to be seen as part of a rational public space, where reform was made possible by the contribution of the social sciences, while class politics was now associated with mass politics, i.e. the domain of irrationality and the "escape from freedom" by lonely, displaced individuals.[11]

However, this transformation did not happen overnight. In fact, it was a gradual, piecemeal process that involved significant soul-searching not only among those reluctant to accept the split between "cold-warriors" and "fellow-travelers," but also among those who accepted it and still clung to the Progressive and New Deal emphasis on class, labor and economic justice. The energies unleashed by and the accomplishments of the FEPC remind us that "what had happened was less the eclipse of New Deal economic liberalism by a 'rights-based' outlook than the rise of a new awareness of the interconnection between the partially overlapping, partially distinct problems of race and class."[12]

Vital Center Liberalism and Social Rights

Social reform was at the core of Schlesinger's vision of American liberalism, and social conflict played a crucial role in his interpretation of American history. As a young rising star at Harvard and later as a prominent historian and public intellectual, he consistently stressed that the roots of postwar American liberalism were to be found in the reforms of the Progressive Era and the New Deal. He saw liberalism as "the vital center," that is, the only American political tradition that could both deal with the "social question" emerging in modern industrial societies and, at the same time, cope with the imperatives of national security.

Far from being a dangerous European legacy, in Schlesinger's view, social conflict was part and parcel of American social and political history. In fact, *The Vital Center* – his notorious manifesto of Cold War liberalism published in 1949 – resonates with a heated anti-business rhetoric that would probably stun anyone who mistakenly took it as a call for a middle-of-the road, centrist compromise. It is quite remarkable that he opened his case for what he defined as a "new radicalism" by attacking the pro-communist left worldwide and the pro-business right in America with the same virulence, dismissing the former as "the tyranny of the irresponsible bureaucracy" and the latter as "the tyranny of the irresponsible plutocracy."[13]

Urging his fellow liberals to come to terms with the issue of class at a time when anti-communist rhetoric was defining the contours of American political discourse, he wrote:

> In spite of the current myth that class conflicts in America were a fiendish invention of Franklin D. Roosevelt, classes have, in fact, played a big part in American political life from the beginning…
> The fight on the part of the 'humble members of society' against business domination has been the consistent motive of American liberalism. Far from importing subversive European ideas when he renewed his theme, Franklin Roosevelt was only returning to the political doctrine of the hallowed past. Nor is there anything specifically Marxist about class conflict…
> I cannot imagine a free society which has eliminated conflict. So long as there is inequality in the distribution of property and variety in the nature of economic interests, so long will politics center on economic issues; and so long the insurgency of the discontented will provide the best guarantee against the tyranny of the possessors.[14]

"Conflict" was not exactly a popular concept in the American political culture of the late 1940s and 1950s. This was a time when "consensus" was hailed as the distinctive mark of American history and current public life both by critics like Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz and by apologists like Daniel Boorstin and David Potter. In a review of Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Schlesinger argued that emphasizing consensus on shared American values could not overshadow the fact that "the conflict within the

liberal consensus between 'liberalism' and 'conservatism' has been one of the sources of creativity and advance in American history." In his writings, he deprived the tension between "the haves and the have-nots" of any radical or ideological connotation, and placed it at the core of his interpretation of American history and his vision of American liberalism. His classic works on Andrew Jackson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, as well as many of his countless essays, reviews and articles in widely circulated magazines form a consistent attempt to build a liberal canon centered on the active role of the federal government as the major provider of social justice. Strong, enlightened leadership acted as a broker between conflicting interests and, consequently, put the brakes on a revolutionary escalation of social conflict, which the greedy myopia of the business community could generate. The progressive presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and the liberal presidency of Franklin Roosevelt were the cornerstones of this canon:

> The process of redefining liberalism in terms of the social needs of the 20th century was conducted by Theodore Roosevelt and his New Nationalism, Woodrow Wilson and his New Freedom, and Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. Out of these three great reform periods there emerged the conception of a social welfare state, in which the national government had the express obligation to maintain high levels of employment in the economy, to supervise standards of life and labor, to regulate the methods of business competition, and to establish comprehensive patterns of social security.[15]

This general outlook, based on the confidence in the ability of liberal politics implemented by assertive federal institutions to tackle the social inequality created by unregulated free market and greedy businessmen, informed Schlesinger's early approach to the issue of race in the U.S. It is argued here that, up to the mid-1950s, this approach is better understood in light of the correlation between race and class described above, which was magnified by events abroad. In later years, when the intensity of the Cold War pressure on national politics decreased and the advent of the "affluent society" seemed to have removed poverty and inequality from the political discourse, the connection between economic and racial justice lost importance in Schlesinger's call for a "qualitative liberalism."

Schlesinger's "Federalism" and Civil Rights

Schlesinger's belief that an activist federal government was the most effective agent of social change led him to adopt a moderate top-down approach to civil rights, which was consistent with Myrdal's quest for federal activism against racial discrimination. "While we may not be able to repeal prejudice by law," he wrote in *The Vital Center*, "yet law is an essential part of the enterprise of education which alone can end prejudice."[16]

To be sure, he was overly optimistic regarding the challenge of racial justice. He hailed Truman's victory in the election of 1948 as a demonstration that the civil rights agenda

of his campaign was by and large accepted across the nation and specifically in the South: "This result suggests that the South on the whole accepts the objectives of the civil rights program as legitimate, even though it may have serious and intelligible reservations about timing and method."[17] Schlesinger's flawed judgment is telling evidence of the complacent perception of race relations among many white, urban, elite, northern liberals. It also obviously reinforced the mistrust towards Cold War liberalism among all those who rejected the dichotomy between free world vs. totalitarianism. In the following decade, as racial injustice continued to stain American democracy and damage the nation's reputation abroad and the civil rights movement emerged as a major force in American society, Schlesinger gradually realized that his earlier optimism had been misplaced. In the early 1960s, as he looked in retrospect, he conceded that liberals like him "recognized that historic injustices had to end, but they thought that steady and rational progress step by step over a period of years would suffice to satisfy the victims of injustice and contain their incipient revolution."[18]

Critics have stressed that confidence in top-down, cautious government action and fear of mass participation and grassroots mobilization account for Schlesinger's oversimplified attitude towards civil rights. However, the picture is probably more complex. It can be argued that his optimistic attitude was intertwined with a genuine, if cautious, commitment to racial justice, and that both optimism and commitment are related to his early interpretation of civil rights as part of the larger issue of economic justice in America.

Schlesinger's mistrust in the ability of the American business community to provide valuable political leadership and to agree on fair social policies was so pervasive that it led him to read racial discrimination as a legacy of nineteenth-century laissez faire capitalism. As he addressed a NAACP conference in 1950, he remarked that the "Negro problem" was not just a consequence of slavery; it was also due to the short-sighted working of unregulated capitalism, which had denied African Americans the opportunities that a free society had made available to white Americans.[19] As an historian who emphasized the importance of social conflict and the existence of classes, he was skeptical about interpretations drawing on psychology and "behavioral sciences," which were characteristic of American historiography in the 1950s. Accordingly, he mocked historians who, influenced by Theodore Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*, considered racial discrimination as the product of authoritarian education, "as if parents south of the Mason-Dixon line were notably more authoritarian than parents in Massachusetts or Minnesota."[20] Class and politics mattered more than psychology and education.

Schlesinger's outlook had been forged in the tradition of post-World War I Progressivism and New Deal liberalism, which cast all major issues in terms of economics and class, seen as "rational," rather than race, culture and ideology, seen as "irrational" and politically counterproductive after the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan and the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s. This outlook accounts for the poor record of the New Deal on

civil rights. Roosevelt failed to tackle racial injustice not only because of political calculation, i.e. his unwillingness to pay the political costs of anti-lynching and pro-civil rights legislation, but also because 1930s liberalism typically maintained that economic reform would eventually lead to better living and working conditions for ordinary Americans and, in the process, to significant changes in the life of blacks and other minorities.[21]

In the aftermath of World War II, though Schlesinger continued to read the race issue through a prewar lens, he was also acutely aware of the changes in postwar national politics. Consequently, he tried to adapt his approach to a time when a response to racial injustice through specific civil rights policies was made necessary by major domestic and international developments: the agency of African Americans, emboldened by their contribution in the war effort; the defeat of Nazism and, consequently, the definitive de-legitimization of all sorts of racism; and finally the worldwide loss of prestige and credibility of the U.S. caused by institutionalized racism in southern states. In doing so, he cautiously but consistently worked in favor of civil rights legislation among mainstream, anti-communist liberals in the late 1940s and early 1950s. His inclination to see civil rights as part of the broader issue of economic justice at home and abroad – which set him apart from most of his fellow Cold War liberals – is one of the motives behind his commitment to racial justice.

Schlesinger advocated federal intervention for civil rights reform in his writings as well as in his role as participant in liberal politics in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As a founding member of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) he was among those who urged Truman to include a civil rights plank in his platform for the election of 1948. The creation of a permanent, powerful FEPC was a major part of ADA liberals' quest for civil rights reform from the late 1940s to the 1960s. The ADA was founded in 1947 by liberal democrats like Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey, intellectuals like Schlesinger and John Kenneth Galbraith and labor leaders like David Dubinsky and Walter Reuther. At a time when the pressure of the imminent Cold War was splitting the progressive camp along the free world vs. totalitarianism divide, the ADA intended to distance anti-communist liberalism from the "frontist" left *à la* Henry A. Wallace and organize liberal and labor forces to counter the rising conservative influence within the Democratic party.[22]

As the ADA supported the Truman doctrine and a tough stance on foreign policy issues, it also needed to bolster its reform-minded profile at home. As the election of 1948 approached, it chose to do so by pushing a pro-labor and pro-civil rights agenda at the Democratic convention. Here the ADA advocated such measures as the establishment of a permanent FEPC as well as anti-lynching, anti-poll tax legislation and the end of discrimination in the armed forces. Indeed, this move contributed to Truman's critical decision to adopt a pro-civil rights agenda in his campaign, which in turn precipitated

the clash with southern Democrats and paved the way towards a significant realignment in southern politics.

The organization continued to voice concern about and urge legislation in favor of civil rights in the following years. In 1950, Schlesinger wrote in an ADA policy statement that: "We feel that the treatment of the Negro in the United States constitutes the most disgraceful blot on our democratic pretensions. While we recognize that the situation has intricate psychological and social origins, we believe that our society can show its decency only by a vigorous and steady movement to abolish all legal and social sanctions of discrimination."[23] In his NAACP address in the same year, he reiterated his call for top-down reform as well as his confidence: "we would wish that our political leaders would show a little more earnest devotion to their campaign pledges on such issues as FEPC. But if we continue our fight, FEPC is coming, and the rest of the Civil Rights program too."[24]

ADA's call for the establishment of a permanent, effective FEPC resurfaced at the 1952 convention. However, when the fight for the selection of the Democratic nominee intensified, the organization chose to compromise on major liberal issues and supported Adlai Stevenson, whose views on civil rights were rather conservative. For most liberal Democrats, restoring unity within the party by appeasing its powerful southern base was more important than insisting on pro-civil rights legislation. In fact, as Stephen Gillon maintains, the ADA "was frequently torn between its commitment to broad ideas of social justice and its desire to work within the Democratic party."[25] Furthermore, anti-communist, centrist liberals found themselves caught in the dilemma between gradual, "responsible" change and the domestic constrains of the early Cold War years.

The issue of civil rights, due to its implications at both the domestic and international levels, exemplifies this "liberal dilemma." During the campaigns of 1952 and 1956, Schlesinger, like other liberal intellectuals, worked with Stevenson as a speechwriter and adviser. His attempts to persuade the Democratic candidate to be more assertive on civil rights were unsuccessful, but apparently he and his fellow liberal Democrats were ready to accept a weak civil rights agenda by a supposedly strong candidate. In the campaign of 1956, Schlesinger, impatient with Stevenson's appeal to African Americans for patience and moderation, expressed his frustration in his private journal as follows:

> I pointed out that the Negroes had never gotten anywhere except through putting on pressure, and they knew it…I said that he expected the Negroes to be more reasonable than he expected the Southerners to be, and that this seemed to me unfair. He replied that of course it was unfair; it was like expecting business to behave badly and labor to behave intelligently; but life was unfair.[26]

Schlesinger's reference to blacks' agency points to the crisis of his approach to racial justice and anticipates a process that eventually led him to embrace a much less moderate

stance. In the mid-1950s, however, political contingency and long-term transformations had led to the crisis of what can be defined as his New Deal-Fair Deal approach to racial and economic justice.

As a "federalist" who believed in the virtues of a top-down, legislative approach to reform, he was impatient with President Eisenhower's hands-off attitude towards desegregation. Following the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, he attacked the president's unwillingness to lead on this issue. "There is only one man in the country," he wrote to Walter Lippmann in 1956, "who can summon up, not just the legal, but the moral resources of the nation and bring to people a sober realization of the terrible crisis towards which we are fast moving…But thus far the president has displayed no interest at all in what is surely the most ominous domestic situation we have seen for many years."[27] Weak presidential leadership, magnified by the violent white backlash in southern states against desegregation, made the optimism of Schlesinger's early approach to civil rights more questionable than ever. Moreover, the agency of black Americans was impossible to ignore thanks to the rise of a grassroots civil rights movement in the South.

Finally, his New Deal-Fair Deal approach was undermined at its foundations by the evolution of American liberalism through the course of the 1950s. This was a time when the liberal-labor coalition that the so-called "vital center" liberalism had tried to revive was in crisis. Not only were liberals struggling to adjust to the complacent, affluent America of the mid-1950s, but labor also grew more conservative and craft-oriented with the 1955 reunification of the AFL and the CIO. Widespread, unprecedented prosperity and mass consumption triggered a discussion on the crisis of liberalism both inside and outside the liberal camp. Apologists of consensus liberalism deemed the notion of class largely irrelevant, if not detrimental, as a tool for understanding and changing American society during the allegedly post-ideological age of abundance, while radical critics like C. Wright Mills celebrated the demise of the labor mystique and the rise of young intellectuals as new agents of change.[28]

Schlesinger and Galbraith were at the forefront of this discussion. The call of the former for a transition from "quantitative" to "qualitative" liberalism echoed and popularized the argument made by the latter in *The Affluent Society*. In a number of influential magazine articles, Schlesinger sought to deal with "the challenge of abundance" by declaring the "irrelevance"of the New Deal-Fair Deal liberalism focused on "full employment, rising national income, and expanding economic opportunities." As the old liberalism had by and large achieved those goals, the new one had to tackle new, pressing issues like individual fulfillment in a mass society, the contrast between private plenty and public squalor and the tension between single interests and public welfare. By writing that "poverty and reaction," which were the "major sources of social discontent" in the 1930s, had now "receded from the forefront of our national life," he triggered the reaction of old-school

liberal and labor leaders like Leon Keyserling, who sarcastically remarked that "evidently the problem of poverty is not 'massive' in [Harvard's] Widener Library."[29]

In sum, Schlesinger adopted Hofstadter's distinction between "interest politics" and "status politics," considerably toned down his anti-business rhetoric and ended up with a rather generic attempt to redefine the liberal agenda. In this context, he reiterated that "equality of opportunities not only for the Negroes but for all nationality groups must be an essential ingredient of the new liberalism,"[30] but failed to indicate the social coalition, the political strategy and the legislative tools necessary to achieve that goal. The crisis of the old New Deal-Fair Deal paradigm undermined the labor-based approach to civil rights, which had proved theoretically consistent but politically inconclusive. As the connection between economic rights and civil rights vanished, Schlesinger, like many of his fellow moderate liberals, wondered how to account for the persistence of racial injustice at a time when economic injustice and poverty were allegedly disappearing from the American landscape.

The backlash against desegregation led him to embrace voting rights as the tool to dismantle all forms of institutionalized racism – a significant departure from his earlier approach. Later, his work with John F. Kennedy, another Democratic leader whose record on civil rights throughout the 1950s had been less than impressive, certainly did not facilitate this search for a new paradigm. The grassroots, southern, religiously oriented and rural civil rights movement remained inevitably alien to many elite, northern, secular and urban liberals. However, the wave of activism at the grassroots level and the emergence of national leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. led Schlesinger to fully support the movement, which he saw as a democratic revolution comparable only to the rise of labor organizations during the New Deal.[31] By the late 1960s, Schlesinger had returned to active politics with Robert Kennedy and, unlike many of his fellow moderate liberals, had come to embrace a decidedly more radical stance. At a time when his "vital center" liberalism seemed definitively out of date and the quest for racial justice was taking a radical turn, he wrote that "collective violence, including the recent riots in black ghettoes, has often forced those in power to redress just grievances. Extralegal group violence, for better or worse, has been part of the process of American democracy."[32]

The International Dimension

This essay has attempted to discuss Schlesinger's changing view on the relations between class and race in light of the rise and decline of the New Deal-Fair Deal approach to economic and racial justice. The extensive literature on postwar liberalism is often careful to take into account the context of the Cold War, due to the obvious importance of the international dimension as both an impulse and an obstacle to liberal reform.

Radical critics stressed that the anti-communist zeal of Cold War liberals led to a fatal split within the left in the late 1940s and that a significant opportunity for progressive change in America was lost as a result.[33] Recent historiography has broken new grounds by discussing civil rights in light of the Cold War and decolonization. Since segregation in the American South jeopardized America's credibility as the leader of the free world, Cold War pressures helped pave the way towards crucial steps in desegregation and, at the same time, limited the scope of civil rights reform.[34] Finally, historians who define liberalism mostly as the quest for a federal, top-down approach to the pursuit of the common good have identified the Cold War years as a time when the expansion of federal power in the realm of national security provided the foundations for "big government" in other areas as well, including welfare and civil rights.[35] It can be argued that to fully understand the domestic impact of events abroad, one must consider race, class and racial and economic justice as "partially overlapping, partially distinct problems" in postwar America as well as abroad. The international dimension will therefore now be addressed.

World War II opened Schlesinger's eyes to the reality of segregation in the South. As a member of the Office of War Information on a tour of army bases in the South in 1942, he had a firsthand experience of "the miserable and hopeless conditions in the Negro sections of Southern towns." Later, as an analyst of the Office of Strategic Services overseas, he was "impressed by the Negro readiness to serve the country which, in some respects, promised so little to them."[36] After the war years, when the propaganda of Axis powers heavily exploited racial discrimination to undermine the international credibility of the American democracy, observers grasped the international implications of civil rights reform. Myrdal argued again that "America, for its international prestige, power, and future security, needs to demonstrate to the world that American Negroes can be satisfactorily integrated into its democracy."[37]

After the war, events abroad continued to influence Schlesinger's view on civil rights. As an impassioned "cold warrior," and as an intellectual who valued the role of ideas in politics, he easily grasped the detrimental effects of segregation in the context of the ideological warfare against international communism, especially among non-white people. In his NAACP address in 1950, he remarked that racial justice was relevant to national security: "the Civil Rights program is an essential part, not just of our domestic policy, but of our foreign policy, and of our entire moral existence."[38]

Cold War ideological warfare posed a partially new challenge to the U.S., one in which the overlapping of racial and economic justice was more significant than it had been during the war. As hostile propaganda came from the Soviet Union, it is no surprise that the exposure of American racial segregation and capitalist exploitation often came in one package. In 1946, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow reported on an article in the Soviet periodical *Trud* about lynching and African American labor in the South. It denounced that "semi-slave forms of oppression and exploitation are the rule" in the rural South

where "the unjust position of the Negro population is expressed…in a slave system of economic relationships and in the law."[39]

This argument could have devastating consequences on the war for the hearts and minds being waged against the Soviet Union as well as left-wing parties both inside and outside the West. In fact, the overlapping of race and class was crucial in the early Cold War years exactly because it was not an invention of Cominform propaganda. At home, as seen earlier, the quest for civil rights was often labor-based in terms of actors, strategies, objectives and, to some extent, ideology. Abroad, the first total war with a truly global impact had unleashed a quest for economic security and racial justice. Social upheaval, which threatened political stability in Western European countries with relatively strong democratic traditions, posed a significant challenge to the Truman administration. Once the pillars of the Atlantic order were established and the European situation seemed stabilized, some in Washington feared that consequences throughout the Third World, stirred by nationalist and anti-imperialist impulses, might be even more devastating.[40]

Black leaders in America were very much aware of the potential for worldwide social change. "A wind is rising," wrote NAACP executive secretary Walter F. White in 1945, "a wind of determination by the have-nots of the world to share in the benefits of freedom and prosperity which the haves of the world have tried to keep exclusively for themselves. That wind blows all over the world."[41] In fact, in the 1940s, a racial revolution was underway at the local, national and global levels whose transnational impact both on the Cold War and on the civil rights movement has been neglected by historians of both sub-fields for many years.[42]

Schlesinger's *Vital Center* offered a vivid portrait of what was seen as the threat of a worldwide "social revolution" that came with distinctive racial overtones. He warned the American public that in the global upheaval stirred by war and decolonization, the Soviet Union enjoyed a significant advantage over the U.S. exactly because its message, blending class revolution and racial equality, was very effective, while on the contrary the U.S. was associated with both capitalist exploitation and racial segregation. In Europe, the U.S. strategy based on reconstruction and containment responded to American objectives, but elsewhere things were much more complicated. Africa, Asia and Latin America, Schlesinger wrote, were

> in the throes of social revolution – a revolution deriving its force from discontent on the land and having as its goal the assertion of national independence and the beginning of industrialization. It is a revolt against the landlords, against the money lenders, against foreign political domination, against foreign economic exploitation. It is taking place across the world from the paddyfields of China to the pampas of Argentina – in Burma, in India, in Indonesia, in the Middle-East, and in a somewhat different form, in the independent nations of Eastern Europe and Latin America. It is a revolution which has not reached its climax and which will not be checked by attempts to reinstate the past

through main force. Its beneficiaries are Mao Tse-Tung, Rakosi, Tito, Peron, Villareal; its beneficiaries are also Nehru, Soekarno, Betancourt, Haya de la Torre, Luis Munoz-Marin. *And in Africa, as to an extent in Latin America and Asia, the social revolution is given an edge of bitterness by the hatred of the colored races of the world for their white oppressors.*[43]

It is quite revealing that Schlesinger, who had emerged as an outspoken anti-communist advocate way before the Cold War had reached its apex, was alert to the ideological appeal of international communism outside the West. He stressed that communist egalitarianism and his call for social revolution were tough competitors in the global ideological warfare underway especially in the developing world, where the race factor played a role:

> The USSR claims to stand – and many thousands of individual Communists have stood honestly and courageously – for racial equality. The racial cruelties in the United States or in most areas of western colonialism compare unfavorably with the Soviet nationalities policy (at least as described in Soviet propaganda) and with the long Russian tradition of racial assimilation.[44]

The challenge was such that old assets of the American foreign-policy agenda and ideology like anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism were no longer enough. What was needed, Schlesinger argued, was reform at home and abroad: support for progressive, reform-minded governments in the Third World and, at the same time, domestic reform leading a new pattern of race relations. "We must reform our racial practices – not only repeal such insulting symbols as the Oriental exclusion laws, but demonstrate a deep and effective concern with the racial inequities within the United States."[45]

It is noteworthy that arguably the most pointed quest for civil rights reform in *The Vital Center* came in a chapter on "Freedom in the World." The international dimension showed that race and class were overlapping issues not only for the activists of the American civil rights movement of the 1940s but also for millions of non-white people in countries whose Cold War loyalties seemed up for grabs.

On the one hand, then, it is fair to conclude that events abroad reinforced the urgency of domestic reform geared at economic and racial justice. On the other hand, however, the international dimension introduced a major obstacle to the cooperation of liberals and radicals, black and white, which was necessary to achieve that goal. The Cold War not only weakened the American left but it also made discussing or dealing with racial and economic justice as two interconnected, mutually reinforcing issues increasingly suspect.

Schlesinger aptly exemplifies this contradiction between the theoretical awareness that race and class were to be tackled as overlapping issues and the political inability to do so. Since 1946, when he emerged as a vigorous anti-communist voice among liberals, he had warned the American public that the labor movement and African Americans were the two major targets of communist infiltration. In a notorious *Life* article, he went so

far as to denounce the attempts by the PCUSA to "sink its tentacles into the NAACP," a remark that was quite disturbing for executive secretary White and his organization, which was determined to fit into the anti-communist climate of opinion of those years.[46] A few years later, when the NAACP was safely within the contours of Cold War liberal consensus, Schlesinger addressed the organization and, as seen above, reiterated his now-familiar support for the establishment of a federal body against discrimination in the workplace.

Other civil rights leaders and organizations agreed to form the FEPC, but their views of the major domestic and international issues were incompatible with "vital center" liberalism. Black activist and artist Paul Robeson was among those who saw the quest for civil rights as part of a more comprehensive and radical transformation of American society. In 1951, he warned his audience at the National Labor Conference on Negro Rights meeting that the enemies of African Americans were "the lynchers, the profiteers, the men who give FEPC the run-around in the Senate, the atom-bomb maniacs and the war makers," rather than communists.[47]

Those who embraced the civil rights agenda as a Cold War imperative were essentially moved by, or at least accepted, its underlying anti-communism. The break up of the New Deal coalition along Cold War lines harmed the labor-based civil rights movement and paved the way towards an approach to racial justice based on a top-down, legalistic approach stressing desegregation and voting rights. Whether or not that coalition was powerful enough to actually carry on extensive reform in the aftermath of the war, as radical historians argue, remains to be seen. It is indisputable, however, that by the 1960s, after the movement's great achievements to end legal segregation and discrimination, its radicalization came as a reminder that economic justice, which had ignited its earlier, "labor-based" phase, was still a critical issue for black Americans.

As Cold War tensions receded due to de-Stalinization, the split between the Soviet Union and China and the first steps of détente, Schlesinger finally came to see the urgency of racial justice in its own right. In the early 1960s, he dismissed the argument that pro-civil rights legislation was needed to improve the international "image" of the U.S.[48] However, commitment to social reform at home and containment abroad continued to inform his liberal vision. Ultimately, the tension between these two poles within postwar liberalism exploded with the Vietnam War. Looking at the war in retrospect, President Lyndon Johnson described the tension with his characteristic bluntness:

> If I left the woman that I really loved – the Great Society – in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South

Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.[49]

Schlesinger, an early critic of the war in Vietnam among centrist liberals, was hardly a supporter of Johnson. Furthermore, he would have probably formulated that dilemma with a wording more attuned to the jargon of "the best and the brightest." Nonetheless, Johnson's was but the latest, tragic development of the "liberal dilemma" between social and civil rights on the one hand and Cold War imperatives on the other, which Schlesinger's "vital center" liberalism faced from the early years of the Cold War onwards.

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3. Michael Ignatieff, "Return of the L-Word," *New York Times*, November 11, 1998.

4. Nancy L. Cohen, "The 'L' Word: The Challenge for Progressives," *The Huffington Post*, March 31, 2008.

5. John B. Judis, "America the Liberal," *The New Republic*, November 19, 2008. See also the Pew Research Center "Generation Next" Report of January 2007 at http://people-press.org/report/300/a-portrait-of-generation-next.

6. *New Republic*, May 6, 2009.

7. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 4.

8. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (no. 3, Dec. 1988), 788.

9. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 242. See also Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," 787.

10. Kevin M. Schultz, "THE FEPC and the Legacy of the Labor-Based Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s," *Labor History*, 49 (no. 1, February 2008), 71-92.

11. Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," 1070-72.

12. Foner, *Story of American Freedom,* 247.

13. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center. The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 153.

14. *Ibid.*, 171, 172.

15. Schlesinger, "Liberalism in America. A Note for Europeans," *Perspectives USA*, 14 (Winter 1956), reprinted in *The Politics of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963). For an earlier, critical assessment by Schlesinger of the consensus history, see his review of Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition* in the *American Historical Review*, 54 (no. 3, April 1949), 612-13.

16. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 190.

17. *Ibid.*, 190.

18. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days. John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 926.

19. Schlesinger, "Flight From Freedom," *The Christian Register*, 129 (no. 8, Sept. 1950).

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26. Schlesinger, *Journals, 1952-2000* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 41-42.

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37. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 1015-16.

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