

The Need to Say NO

May 21, 2010

[This review appeared in NEW POLITICS, vol. I, no. 4, summer 1962 (old series).]

AS A NOVELIST, a middle class man of the mid-century, a Jew and a socialist, Harvey Swados is that wonderful rarity in the United States today, a committed human being. His recently published collection of essays written over the last ten years, *A Radical's America*,* reveals his deep sense of disturbance about the quality of contemporary American life, its cant and corruption.

Unwilling to accept the latest wrinkle in sociological interpretations of the manners and mores of the American working class, Swados has written a number of essays on the nature of work, exploitation, leisure and cultural backwardness which do an enormous amount to destroy the Madison Avenue image of the American worker as a member of the middle class. "But there is one thing that the worker doesn't do like the middle class: he works like a worker," Mr. Swados writes in an essay entitled "The Myth of the Happy Worker." "The steelmill puddler does not yet sort memos, the coal miner does not yet sit in conferences, the cotton mill-hand does not yet sip martinis from his lunch-box. The worker's attitude toward his work is generally compounded of hatred, shame and resignation."

In "Labor's Cultural Degradation" he gives voice to the complaint that it is the man at the bottom of the heap, the man who does the dirty work, who is the particularly exploited victim of the mass media, not given an honest possibility of developing an individual taste for individual works of the human imagination, not having the range of cultural choice available to members of the middle class. "I for one think that the working class—regardless of whether it is envied by other proletarians who would like to drive cars instead of riding bicycles, or would like to ride bicycles instead of walking—is being cheated, swindled, and degraded as ferociously as ever its English counterparts were a century ago when Marx and Engels were anatomizing them. The fact that it may not be aware of its exploitation does not alter the reality of its situation."

The very nature of work, its boredom, frustration, lack of personal fulfillment is probed in the essay "Work as a Public Issue" in which questions are raised about the possibility of those working in factories, participating in decision making affecting their own working lives; the decentralization of productive facilities to the point where their management can be at least partially controlled by the workers themselves. If he has no definitive answers to many of the problems he raises, his suggestion that "the meaning of work be brought forth from the philosopher's study and placed where it belongs—in the political arena—as a public issue" is both valid and welcome.

Harvey Swados' concerns encompass Jewishness and alienation in "Certain Jewish Writers," the plight of the contemporary American woman in "The Dilemma of the Educated Woman," the special problems of the young in "Work and the Professions," "Popular Taste and the Agonies of the Young," and "Why Resign from the Human Race?"

Lest we forget, he reminds us of the misery of the unemployed in "The Miners: Men Without Work" and the acute problems faced by striking workers and their unions in "The Myth of the Powerful Worker."

These are not the writing of a detached, objective onlooker. *A Radical's America* is a passionate indictment of contemporary values by an intellectual who is an active participant in American life, who holds that "a socialist attitude is at least as firmly in the American grain as a liberal or an

absolutist stance” and who clearly differentiates himself from those intellectuals drawn to the Washington orbit, as well as those drawn to Moscow, or more recently, Belgrade, Peking or Havana.

The essays are required reading for the young and idealistic, for the old and disenchanted. They offer evidence “that those of us who persist in saying No to a society built on worship of the buck for the things and people it can buy, those of us who persist in dreaming of a society built on mutual respect, have just as much right to consider ourselves as representative of an essential corpuscular element in the American bloodstream as do the Luces, the Nixons, the Kennedys, and all those who, in appropriating for themselves even the rhetoric of our common dream have turned it into a nightmare.” For Harvey Swados, that dream still holds a large measure of enchantment.

* A RADICAL’S AMERICA by Harvey Swados, Little, Brown and Company, 1962, 437 pp., \$5.00.