

Daniel P. Moynihan, "The United States in Opposition" in **Commentary**, vol. 59, no. 3.

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In this article Daniel Moynihan discusses the social origins of what he calls "The tyranny of the UN's new majority". By this he means the decisions taken at several conferences sponsored by the UN under the pressure of the majority of the members. Among the events discussed in the article are the UN Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972), the UN World Population Conference (Bucharest, 1974), the World Food Conference (Rome, 1974), and the UN General Assembly (1974).

Moynihan is appalled by the content of these decisions, offers an explanation for them, and suggests a specific policy to be followed by the United States in the UN. He says that "a vast majority of the nations of the world feel there are claims which can be made on the wealth of individual nations that are both considerable and threatening—in any event threatening to countries such as the United States which regularly finds itself in a minority".

His explanation can be summarized as follows: ". . . What happened in the early 1970s is that for the first time the world felt the impact of what for lack of a better term I shall call the British revolution". According to the author "the new nations absorbed ideas . . . from the doctrines of British socialism". These ideas, both about themselves and about the British, include "a suspicion of, almost a bias against, economic development" for . . . "redistribution, not production, remained central to the ethos of socialism". The second general point about socialist doctrine as it developed in Britain was that it was anti-American. Among the ideas about themselves, Moynihan includes "the right to independence", "the belief that they have been subject to economic exploitation" and "the belief that they have been subject to ethnic discrimination".

This set of ideas constitutes the political culture of the new nations. But it is an imported political culture: "They are learned ideas, and they were learned by the new nations mostly where they

mostly originated, in the intellectual and political circles of Britain of the late 19th and early 20th century . . . At root, the ideas of exploitation and discrimination represent a transfer to colonial populations of the fundamental socialist assertions with respect to the condition of the European working class, just as the idea of independence parallels demands that the working class break out of bondage and rise to power”.

Having explained the origins of the ideas and as a consequence the source of the decisions taken at the international conferences, Moynihan goes on to consider what is to be done. What he suggests is that the United States should go into opposition, loyal opposition. It is time for the United States to speak out, for “International liberalism and its processes have enormous recent achievements to their credit . . . until the dislocations caused by OPEC, things were simply not as bad as they were typically portrayed. Things were better than they had been. Almost anywhere. In many places things were very good indeed”. “Simultaneously, it is to be asserted that these (Third World) economies do less well than they ought: that the difference is of their own making and no one else’s, and no claim on anyone else’s arises in consequence”. Neither Mexico nor a good many other Third World countries “would . . . welcome a sustained comparison between the liberties they provide their own peoples with those which are common and taken for granted in the United States”.

Moynihan’s paper can be read as a piece of scholarship, or as an article written for the body politic of the United States with a political purpose in mind, or as a working paper on the main lines of future United States policy in the UN. After all, Mr. Moynihan is at the same time a professor of government at Harvard University, an experienced politician and the future United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

Reading the article as a piece of scholarship written by a professor of government of one of America’s leading universities, seldom has a man expressed so clearly and explicitly the prejudices that block understanding of the contemporary international situation. The underlying idea is that everything is produced in the centre of the international system, even the ideas that criticize the hegemony of the centre. People born outside the centre are by nature bound to learn from the “real people” everything about themselves and the rest of the world. The leaders of the Third World nations do what they are doing not because of the objective condition of their countries but because their English professors taught them to do so.

This is obviously ethnocentrism, and is bad enough. But in Moynihan’s article one can also find idealism. What is important for him is the **ideology** of the new nations. A different set of professors of the London School of Economics would apparently have changed history by teaching the students non-socialist ideas. And it is also possible to find elitism: only the British-educated elite is responsible for the political behaviour of the new nations.

But the explanation offered is not only based on social prejudice. On purely logical grounds it is unsatisfactory, because it explains the behaviour of only some Third World countries: the former British colonies. By stretching the argument, as Moynihan himself does, one could also explain the behaviour of former European, non-British colonies. But what about Latin American countries? Several of them were particularly active in the conference mentioned, yet they are not covered at all by the explanation offered.

It is true that many of the ideas used by the Third World nations in discussions at the UN conferences are similar to those found in British socialism, but it is not necessary to look for British teachers to find the explanation for this similarity. The position of the Third World in the late 1960s and early 1970s as it offers its raw materials to a free market, unprotected by legislation from the powerful industrial nations, is in fact very close to that of Britain at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when vulnerable industrial workers sold their labour power in a similarly unprotected way. Accordingly, any Third World analysis of the world order will arrive at very similar conclusions to those arrived at by British socialists at the beginning of the present century.

As a piece of scholarship then, I am not very impressed by Moynihan’s article, which seems to be just one more article written by those who are, in spite of their good intentions, unable to understand the complexity of the international situation in the 1970s.

If the article is taken not as a piece of scholarship but as an article written by a politician for the body politic of the United States, it is a most remarkable and successful document. It is well known that the United States is going through a very difficult period of retreat in the international scene, and of doubt about basic values at home. Seen in this context, Moynihan’s article acquires a new meaning.

Quite independently from its prejudices, logical limitations and other weaknesses, his explanation gives to the American centre an assurance it badly

needs. It is comforting to know that the leaders of the Third World nations borrowed their political ideas from the British professors at the London School of Economics, and that there is nothing new in them: they are nothing more than that well-known, old and not very successful creature: British socialism. It follows from this that there is no real new force in international politics that can really threaten the supremacy of the United States. In spite of all the noise in the conferences, the world is still intellectually controlled by the English-speaking people. There is some common ground of understanding between the United Nations and the Third World countries, and given this common ground it will be possible to reach agreement with them sooner or later. The international scene that seemed to be going mad is made in this way intelligible again, and it becomes possible once more to influence international developments.

Besides re-assuring the American centre, Moynihan's article also gives support to its resistance to radical change. It is not necessary to change American social ideas, for these ideas are as true today as they ever were. The only problem was that some dull Americans were sent to the international conferences and didn't fight well enough for these ideas. All that is necessary is to replace them with the right people and the present trend will move once more in favour of the United States and its political ideals.

Last but not least, Moynihan's article is particularly satisfactory for the centre in that it demands a very activist US policy in the United Nations. Energetic men trying hard to implement the right ideas is part of its basic credo. Accordingly, Moynihan should receive a lot of support for his article from the centre, and his nomination by President Ford as Ambassador to the UN is only the first expression of this. From his new position, he will be able to influence American foreign policy. If his article is seen as an outline of his own definition of US policy towards the United Nations and the Third World in general, I cannot but see it as dangerous.

As Moynihan himself recognizes, US delegates to the various UN conferences have been very open to the initiatives of the Third World and have even given their support to some of them. If this policy is now going to change, this will certainly not help to promote peaceful understanding between the United States and the Third World.

Attacking Mexico or any other Third World country for not being able to fulfil all the aspira-

tions of its people is certainly not the best way to win support for the cause of the United States in the international conferences. Worse than that, refusing legitimacy to the claims of the Third World could defeat several initiatives tending to create a new international order, in which the interest of those nations would be better protected than under the present one.