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YOUNG SOCIALIST FORUM

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FEBRUARY, 1958

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THE MIDWEST CONFERENCE

The Midwest Conference for Socialist Youth, which will be held in Chicago the weekend of February 1st, moves us one step closer to the building of a viable youth movement in America.

The modest success shown by campus and off campus clubs around the country in the past six months is one of the indications that the steady decline of socialism has finally come to a halt and a healthy revival has begun.

The YOUNG SOCIALIST, from its beginning, had been an advocate of the idea that the youth movement should be organizationally independent of adult parties and that it should open its doors to all. The experience of the past few months indicates that the local clubs which have based themselves on these concepts have had the most success. I believe that future growth will be along these lines.

With this approach we will be able to unite the bulk of youth already committed to socialism while at the same time spread the ideas of socialism to a much vaster audience.

There are thousands of American youth today who believe in socialism, but whose effectiveness is painfully limited by the lack of organization. Our common problem is to discover the types of activity and action that will overcome this handicap; the discussion at the Midwest Conference should aid in this regard.

BERT DECK

Editorial Board Member
THE YOUNG SOCIALIST

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EDITORIAL NOTES

The Young Socialist Forum is a discussion bulletin published by the editors of the YOUNG SOCIALIST, who hope that it will serve a vital need in providing a vehicle for the discussion that is now taking place among young socialists, and in giving this discussion a national circulation. All socialist-minded youth, whatever their views, are invited to express their ideas in the YSF.

Signed material represents the opinions of the author or authors, and does not necessarily represent the opinions of the YOUNG SOCIALIST. Send all communications to: Young Socialist Forum, Room 3, 218 Seventh Avenue, New York 11, New York.

This Issue:

"Indonesia and the Colonial Revolution: Two Views" was written by two high school students, both members of the Young Socialist Alliance (New York). John Emmett was formerly active in Teens Ahead and Michael Kovacs was in Hashomer Hatzair.

"Perspectives for American Socialism" was written in the spring of 1957 as a draft resolution of the Left-Wing Caucus of the Young Socialist League and submitted to the YSL national convention in June, 1957, where it was defeated.

"Paul Sweezy: A Turn" was written by Leo Adler, a young worker who belongs to the Young Socialist Alliance and the Young Socialist League. Jim Sipple, author of "Wanted -- a New Language" is a student at the University of Chicago. Martha Wohlforth, who wrote "Gervaise, Aristotle, and Art for Art's Sake", was formerly active in the Eugene V. Debs Club at Oberlin College, Associate Editor of Co-ops in Action, and staff writer for the Colorado Daily.

INDONESIA AND THE COLONIAL REVOLUTION: TWO VIEWS

1. John Emmett:

Some time ago I was discussing with a friend of mine the recent and, to my mind, heartwarming developments in Indonesia, where, to summarize the situation almost out of recognition, the Indonesian government of President Sukarno disposed of the last of Dutch imperialism by simply ejecting all Dutch nationals from its territory. My friend was of course outspoken in his criticism of imperialism in general and Dutch imperialism in this particular case (he is a socialist); he complained, however, of the position of the Indonesian Communist Party, which opposed the seizing of the evacuated factories by workers' groups and favored the control of the instruments of production by the bourgeoisie-liberal Sukarno government. This, he felt, was treason to the working class.

On the surface of it, it seems to be just that, and as such would be grounds for serious criticism of the Indonesian CP. However, it is my feeling that a closer examination of the motives of the Communists, and of the motives of Communists in general in supporting bourgeois-nationalist revolutions, will reveal that their action was justified by historical necessity.

It is necessary first to establish a basic analogy: that between the anti-feudal bourgeois revolutions characteristic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the anti-imperialist bourgeois revolutions characteristic of the twentieth. Both the squirearchies of feudal, and the bourgeoisies of imperialist nations are classes unalterably opposed to the development of national industrial capitalism in the countries they control; in both instances because such development implies the downfall of these classes. It has been demonstrated time and again that the coming to the fore of national capitalist industry and of the consequent industrial bourgeoisie presages the destruction of the feudal aristocracy; it is now being demonstrated that the evolution of a national bourgeoisie and the destruction of imperialist power in the same nation are just as inextricably connected. The development of capitalist industry in a feudal nation is stunted and blocked at every step of the way; for it threatens the established economic order of things and that class which holds power under that order fears, and rightly, for its safety. So under imperialism. Capitalist industry in an imperialist-controlled country is a hothouse growth,

induced and carefully controlled from the outside by the imperialist ruler; let it attempt to follow its own line of development, and the far more powerfully imperialist nation will cut it short immediately.

To get down to cases. President Sukarno's coalition of anti-imperialist elements represents primarily the nascent national industrial bourgeoisie, its growth impeded until now by Dutch imperialism, and which will only now begin to find its true strength. It is this bourgeoisie which has expelled the Dutch, and it is its government which has taken over the factories.

Why, then should Marxists support the actions of a bourgeois government?

In Section IV of the Communist Manifesto, one finds the following: "(The Communists) fight with the bourgeoisie whenever it acts in a revolutionary way, against the absolute monarchy, the feudal squirearchy, and the petty bourgeoisie." This was precisely the action of the Indonesian Communists: aware that seizure of the means of production by improvised workers' groups would have created the state of chaos the imperialists wanted as an excuse to make a re-entry, they supported the Indonesian bourgeois in a move to establish a national capitalism, and thus to prepare the way for socialism, which must needs build on the leftovers of capitalism and which, against the powerful force of imperialism, would have a considerably lessened chance of success.

II. Michael Kovacs:

Recent events in Indonesia have spotlighted the battle against imperialism that is taking place throughout most of Asia and Africa. President Sukarno had called for government seizure of the Dutch imperialist holdings. These holdings were not to be nationalized but actually to be held by the government--- I would suppose either to turn over to the native bourgeoisie or to use as a bargaining factor in "deals" with the imperialists.

As the take-overs proceeded, the workers began to take over the holdings of the imperialist Dutch, not in the name of the government, but in their own name. It was so widespread that the army had to be called out.

At this point, the Indonesian Communist Party began to restrain and oppose the take-overs by the workers. A leading Indonesian Communist called the action of the workers, "ill-disciplined anarcho-syndicalism!".

Indonesia is beset by many problems. It is made up of hundreds of islands, on which over 85 million people live. On the outer islands, an almost feudal economy exists, and local military men with private armies dominate the scene. On the inner islands, there is a capitalist economy that has been dominated by foreign interests; here, the working class is concentrated in many places-- on plantations, mines and in various industries.

We can see that this poses many questions: How can the country be unified? How can the Indonesians take control of the economy away from the imperialists and then industrialize the nation? How can living standards be raised, and the almost feudal economy of the outer islands be eliminated?

We have been told that the solution to these problems lies in the achievements of the bourgeois revolution. But then, we find, that the native bourgeoisie, the class that seemingly must achieve it, is a weak undeveloped class; that it cannot supply the capital or the level of technology necessary for the development of the area; that it cannot even unite the country into a functioning unit because it is divided. This division of the native bourgeoisie is reflected in the division of the largest capitalist party, the Nationalist Party. The Sukarno wing is trying to conciliate the imperialists, militarists, and the "feudalists".

If the native bourgeoisie cannot solve these tasks, what class can? These tasks can only be solved through a revolution of the socialist type. The necessary capital accumulation can only be accomplished through nationalization and a planned economy. This means that at the "bourgeois" revolution and "proletarian" revolution must be merely parts of a single uninterrupted revolution. This is most important as it not only applies to Indonesia, but to all of the colonial and semi-colonial areas. The working class is strong enough to carry through such a revolution. This is so because, as pointed out previously, it is concentrated on plantations, mines and in various industries.

As I have pointed out, the native bourgeoisie cannot supply the necessary capital. If the control of the economy remains in the hands of bourgeoisie, it must again fall under imperialist domination.

Once understanding these points, we must realize what role a Marxist party should play in these areas: that of supporting the anti-imperialist struggle even if it is led by the native bourgeoisie, and supporting and extending the power of the working class, which necessarily conflicts with the native bourgeoisie--the struggle of the working class against imperialism is inseparably linked to the struggle against the native bourgeoisie. This was vividly shown by the actions of the workers and of the Indonesian state during the take-overs.

I find it necessary to point out that during the take-overs, the role of the CP developed into a role of defending the bourgeoisie against the working class (a result of being in support of the government, for one thing). The apologists for the Indonesian C P seems to have an extremely mechanistic (Menshevik!!) view of history-- that history develops in separate, easily definable stages. We must remember that history, by law, develops unevenly; that in this case, the "bourgeois" and proletarian revolutions must occur as a single uninterrupted revolution. It is necessary to point out that the role played by the Indonesian CP has been so far, almost equivalent to the role played by the Mensheviks. But in Indonesia, there seems to be no one playing a role similar to that of the Bolsheviks.

I must warn my friends who have 'faith' in the Communist Party of Indonesia, of the other backward areas, and of the entire world, that the continuation of their present politics may result in the demoralization, in the impotence of the working-class movement due to the absence of a truly Marxist-Leninist leadership. I suggest that this does bring into question the role played by the international Communist movement and that it should be discussed at length at a later date.

Marx said, 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win'. This cannot be done without a truly Marxist-Leninist leadership.

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PERSPECTIVES FOR AMERICAN SOCIALISM

(Draft Resolution of the Left-Wing Caucus of the Young Socialist League)

For the first time in decades the regroupment and unification of the dispersed groups of the American left has become the subject of serious discussion among socialists. This corresponds to a pressing need of the American socialist movement and to a radical change in the objective situation confronting socialists on a world scale.

The American socialist movement today is composed of small propaganda groups, isolated from the main stream of the labor movement. This propaganda group existence, this isolation, flow from the general objective conditions of American society in the present period. The working class passivity produced by the permanent war economy combined with the boom phase of the normal prosperity-depression cycle has dried up the natural arena for socialist political activity.

A significant revival of the socialist movement in America can come about only as a result of a fundamental change in this objective situation. Until economic and social changes sufficient to bring about the general radicalization of the American working class have occurred, no organizational move can lead to the establishment of a mass party of socialism in the U.S., nor will American socialists be able to break out of their present isolated propaganda group existence.

Nevertheless, within the limits of the present social and economic conditions of the U.S., the perennial disunity and fragmentation of the left exerts a very harmful influence. This disunity seriously hampers socialist propaganda and agitation. It restricts to a minimum the possibilities for growth open to American socialism at the present time. It is also an obstacle to a future break-through of American socialism from its present isolation.

Unfortunate as the consequences of socialist disunity have been, the fragmentation of the past period has been absolutely necessary. At the time of the first imperialist world war the world working class movement was torn asunder by the split between reformism, opportunism, centrism, social-patriotism and all varieties of class-collaborationism on the one hand, and revolutionary Marxism on the other. Since that time this split has only deepened, despite (or rather, because of) the epochal defeats suffered by the international working class, and therefore by revolutionary socialism. The political victory of revolutionary socialism over social democracy remains today the necessary precondition for successful proletarian revolution.

Superimposed upon this fundamental division has been the influence of Stalinism, the counter-revolutionary product of the degeneration of the Russian revolution. The influence of Stalinism and Stalinist ideology has crippled and paralyzed the best, most revolutionary sections of the working class in every country, and has contributed in no small measure to the success of social democracy in its role as the chief prop of the decaying capitalist order.

The great, fundamental change in the world objective conditions of today is the disintegration of Stalinism. The international working class is now well advanced toward throwing off the Stalinist incubus; through the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Eastern Europe and the collapse of its political instruments, the CPs of the "Western World."

Stalinist ideology has, in the course of the last year, been reduced to a shambles and is rapidly losing its grip over elements, both intellectual and proletarian, hitherto held firmly in line. In America it is the crisis of Stalinism: the disorientation of the socialist groups formerly sympathetic to the Stalinist bureaucracy and the emergence within the Communist Party itself of tendencies in the direction of authentic socialism; that provides the context for socialist regroupment at the present time.

The principal task of a regrouped socialist movement in the present period would be to carry on socialist propaganda and agitation inside the working class and among other potentially radical groups of the population. Another necessary function of a united American socialist movement would be to facilitate a free, open, and democratic discussion of all the issues before the American and international socialist movement, in which all the different tendencies within the socialist movement would participate.

The necessary precondition for the creation of such a movement is the agreement of all the socialist tendencies that would compose it on the basic political program of the movement. This is especially obligatory in view of the fact that the American socialist movement cannot be expected to be anything other than a propaganda group in the immediate future. Any movement in these conditions will be defined politically by the type of propaganda it carries on, by its political program. Regroupment cannot result in a durable unity of socialist groups unless it is based on a common and agreed-on set of political principles.

American socialists can reach this sort of principled agreement only through a process of free discussion, of open confrontation of views. For this reason the YSL seeks to engage in discussions with all socialist tendencies on all the political issues of our times. We encourage the holding of as many forum-type discussions as possible, including as many divergent views as possible. Specifically, we welcome the formation of the American Socialist Forum [American Forum--For Socialist Education], inspired by A.J. Muste. We feel that the ASF can help to provide a setup through which all the important discussion now being conducted within the radical movement can continue and be furthered.

We believe that the political program of a united socialist movement should make a basic and incisive criticism of the most important aspects of the present social order in America. It should offer an attractive socialist alternative to American capitalism as well as to Russian Stalinism. The type of political program we advocate for a united socialist movement is illustrated by the following points:

- a.) A united socialist movement must defend the civil liberties of all victims of the witch-hunt, and it should emphasize the democratic nature of the socialism it advocates.
- b.) This movement should be for a Labor Party as the necessary next step for the American labor movement, and it should oppose the two capitalist parties.
- c.) It should oppose the foreign policy of U.S. imperialism, and support the national liberation movements in colonial countries.
- d.) It should oppose the Stalinist bureaucracy in the name of socialism, and should support the Hungarian and Polish revolutions.

e.) It should, of course, be the firmest ally of the Negro people in their struggle for full equality.

A program of this sort is a necessity. These are the most important political questions in the world. The basic purpose of socialist organization is to advocate socialist politics, and it is impossible to do this without taking a socialist political position on the decisive questions of current politics. At the same time, this socialist political position should be spelled out in terms general enough to allow tendencies with important disagreements on other issues to unite behind it.

As a socialist youth organization, the YSL is primarily concerned with the regroupment of socialist youth. We believe that the regroupment of socialist youth must follow the same general political and organizational lines as the general socialist regroupment in the "adult" field envisaged above. However, we recognize that the tempo of youth regroupment need not be the same as regroupment of the existing "adult" socialist organizations. A more or less prolonged period of discussion may well be required before the existing socialist organizations are able to unite. In the socialist youth field, on the other hand, there exists a unique factor which makes it possible to initiate, if not consummate, the process of regroupment before the "adult" organizations are able to unite. This unique factor is the existence of the YSL itself as the only nationwide socialist youth organization in existence in America today.

In addition to its status as the only nationwide socialist youth organization the YSL has certain unique advantages which give it a chance to play a leading role in uniting American radical youth. It is an independent youth group, unaffiliated to any "adult" socialist organizations. It conceives of itself as a "broad" group, and can include members of different "adult" socialist groups. Its program is quite consistent with the suggested five-point program stated above.

These characteristics -- broadness, independence, socialist politics -- are those that a united socialist youth organization should have. We do not consider independence from any organizational ties to an "adult" organization to be a desirable characteristic for a socialist youth organization under all circumstances, and we believe that a united socialist youth organization should be affiliated to a similarly united "adult" group, under conditions of the widest autonomy. However, under current conditions, when unification of socialist youth is possible before a similar process can take place in the "adult" field, the independence of a united youth movement is a necessary precondition for including within it members of different socialist tendencies.

The YSL possesses the necessary characteristics to serve as a center for the unification of radical youth in the U.S. The YSL therefore rejects all suggestions that it dissolve itself and that its members join some other organization which does not have these characteristics.

Instead, the YSL offers itself as a center for socialist youth regroupment. We desire to unite with all existing radical youth groups who would be willing to discuss unity on the basis of the program stated above. The YSL also invites young members and sympathizers of all "adult" socialist groups to join it. This invitation specifically includes, but is not limited to, the SP-SDF

Socialist Party-Social-Democratic Federation], SWP Socialist Workers Party], Libertarian League, members and sympathizers of the former LYL Labor Youth League], and sympathizers of the magazines American Socialist, Monthly Review, and Dissent.

In all cases where regroupment is not immediately possible, the YSL nevertheless attempts to carry on the widest possible program of discussions and united actions with radical youth of all tendencies. Even if our differences with some groups are too great to permit immediate unity, we still seek out all opportunities for common action on those issues which unite us with other radical youth: defense of civil liberties, support to the struggle of the Negro people, etc. Open political discussion and joint activity can lay a sound basis for a future unity.

In summary: the unification of American socialists into a single political organization would mark an enormous advance for the socialist movement if this unification can be carried out on a socialist political basis. We have suggested the main points of a political program which is broad enough to unite differing socialist tendencies, and at the same time implies a militant socialist position on the main issues of American and world politics. We call on all socialist groups to discuss the political basis of regroupment as widely as possible, and hope to see a united, broad, democratic, militant socialist organization emerge from this process of discussion.

As our immediate perspective as a youth organization we hope to unite with all socialist youth on a basis of socialist politics, and guaranteeing members of all "adult" groups full equality and full freedom of internal and external political expression. We hope to make the unification of all socialist youth our contribution to the process of unification of all American socialists.

PAUL SWEEZY: A TURN

By Leo Adler

At a Monthly Review meeting on Paul Sweezy's impressions of the USSR and Eastern Europe, I saw what I believed to be a sincere man, desperately holding on to a belief which is the foundation of his hopes. Like so many who can only "kowitz before accomplished facts" Sweezy could only bow in wonder before the industrial progress of Russia. He remained blind to the backwardness of the regime in almost all other areas.

But the foundations are crumbling. The Khrushchev revelations, and events in Eastern Europe climaxed by the Hungarian revolution, have had a tremendous effect on Sweezy and men like him. They are for the first time beginning to speak about the need for a "democratization of the Soviet Union" and for a progressive struggle that will achieve the aims of socialism. "Liberalization does not mean democracy," said Sweezy. For a man with his background to say this shows a definite turn.

But he is still clinging to his hope in the Soviet Union and its leaders. The opening of his speech mainly concerned itself with the industrial progress in Russia, under a "socialized economy." He said the "country is over the hump; from now on the USSR will be traveling down hill, making easy progress." In the rest of the speech he expressed critical support of the Soviet Union. The main gist of it went like this: "How can a society which refuses to treat its people like adults realize the full potentialities of those people?" He claims the USSR has socialism, but not real socialism. Russia is a classless society. Its ruling clique has no economic base, and cannot perpetuate itself by inheritance. He does concede, however, that there is a tendency for a sort of class development in the nature of some of the unavoidable special privileges for education and culture available to the children of the bureaucracy. But he claims this tendency is being determinedly fought. The poor are now being given equal opportunities, such as free education for capable students. But, he continues, there is a gap between the masses and the bureaucracy, which rules as a dictatorship.

This condition, he points out, is not socialism. Socialism is "equality and human solidarity. It means the dignity of man." Fine! We agree. But how will you get this in Russia? Mr. Sweezy's answer to this is, "It will be the people who will peacefully change the society." He says it will not be a revolutionary change. From this we can only suppose that through mass pressure the bureaucracy will reform itself (as it did in Hungary!) Although he admits that the Hungarian revolution was a workers uprising, at the same time he must support Russia, because of "power politics." Perhaps he is just bending with the wind; after all, can anyone now deny that there is no democracy in Russia?

WANTED - A NEW LANGUAGE

"Wall Street", "The Masses", "Class Struggle", traditional Socialist terminology, yet today merely cliches, words and phrases that have been used and misused until they have lost all practical significance and thus are completely irrelevant in a time when young Socialists are attempting to articulate the essential truth of a radical program in America. My thesis is then, that if we are to speak in any relevant way to the American people we must renounce the cliches of both traditional Socialist thought and particularly the various sectarianisms in which many young Socialists are still speaking, for an honest attempt to try to formulate some way in which we can be generally understood. We need then a process of sanitation, as it were, to cleanse our discourse of the old language and the substitution of some new manner of speaking that can revive the real dynamic which we so sorely need to address contemporary America.

To fill the tremendous gap thus left after this process has taken place, I have two very general suggestions:

1) The concretization of our language

Instead of the vagueness of "Wall Street", and "The Masses", we should procede more in terms of concrete situations in labor relations, racial difficulties, etc. Let "The struggles of the peoples" be exemplified in the specific example of "John Smith", who is a worker, describing his situation within the realities of the present system, does it mean anything for him in his concrete situation to even propose a political, economic and social program of a socialist orientation, etc.

2) Use only precise and contemporary language

We must use only words, phrases, and examples which address the world of 1958, not 1900 or 1932, but 1958. Too many of us are talking to a situation which has ceased to exist and thus our speech reflects only too well the claim of many that socialist discussion is an out-dated and naive past-time in the complexities of modern industrial society. We are living in a revolutionary world but one quite different from any earlier period in history. It is now "Montgomery" and not Eugene V. Debs or the Spanish Civil War. It is now the subtities of an America with a peculiarly unique brand of modified capitalism and not the Russia before 1917 or the Germany which existed at the close of the First World War.

This has been then merely the statement of a plea, a plea to begin to lose our old cliches, to speak relevantly to the America of 1958. This can be the beginning of a more acceptable and thus more powerful socialist advance among all people.

Jim Sipple
University of Chicago

"GERVAISE," ARISTOTLE, AND ART FOR ART'S SAKE

By Martha Wohlforth

"Gervaise" is a film that will be hard to forget. A French production, judged the best foreign film of the year by the New York Critics' Circle, it is a fine work of art, in the school of stark realism; but it is more than that -- it is class-conscious. Based on a story of Zola, the setting is the slums of Paris during the regime of Napoleon III, a period when the oppression of the workers had become almost intolerable. (The Paris Commune was to occur a few years later, in 1871.)

The story concerns the struggle of Gervaise, a young woman played by Maria Schell, to live a decent life despite overwhelming odds. Gervaise discovers that the man who has been living with her has suddenly left her and their two children for another woman. Faced by the taunts and jeers of other women in a nineteenth century version of a do-it-yourself laundry, she gets into a vicious, bloody fight with her rival's sister. She fights to defend her dignity and self-respect, and despite the fact that she is a cripple, she wins, with her enemy swearing revenge. Gervaise attempts heroically to better her lot and that of her children. She marries, saves her money, and is finally able to set up her own shop, a laundry. But one unavoidable misfortune after another befalls her; until finally even her proud and fighting spirit is broken. She, who had fought another woman to maintain her self-respect, sits alone and dejected in a bar, heedless of everything but a glass of wine. Her little daughter, Nana, plays in the filth of the street, clothed in rags -- in all likelihood destined to share the fate of her mother.

There is no hope for Gervaise herself, but there is some hope for humanity. This is not spelled out; it is suggested and symbolized by one man. This man, a blacksmith, is obviously a radical, or at least, a very militant and class conscious worker. He leads a strike and is imprisoned for a year, as all strikes were then illegal. In an exchange with a cop during the unforgettable, warm, light-hearted scene of Gervaise's birthday party, he says: "They build homes for soldiers, why not workers?" The cop answers, "Soldiers are soldiers. Workers are workers. Who's going to give anything to workers?" The blacksmith replies, "We don't expect anyone to give us a thing. We'll take it."

Gervaise's respect for this man grows -- he is, in fact, the only person she can respect. Gradually she realizes that she is in love with him, and he with her. But this picture was not made in Hollywood; there is no happy ending to wash away the bitterness. He is the one person who might have saved her. But he leaves Paris, with her son, to look for work, as they can no longer find work in Paris. As Gervaise watches them leave she says to herself, "There go the only two decent things in my life. Perhaps that's why they're going." It is true. From that moment on Gervaise's fate is irreversible.

It is somewhat incongruous to see this film in a high-class "art theater" in a wealthy neighborhood. It jars a person to have others in the audience laughing cynically during a tensely dramatic scene. Even such moviegoers, however, were hit hard by "Gervaise;" the only way that apologists for the status quo could salve their consciences and retain at least some of their complacency was by persuading themselves that conditions are no longer like this; no one

lives this way now; and even then, these poor ignorant workers and their families had their pleasures, did they not? And, after all, Gervaise was just one person -- her story was not at all typical.

But the most striking thing about "Gervaise," to those who have eyes, is the immediacy and universality of the story. The slums of Paris in the 1860's look strangely like the slums of New York and Chicago, 1958. The struggle for a decent life, for the material means of existence, continues; the effect of poverty, of continuous failure, on the human personality, remains the same. And the many types of human beings portrayed -- the courageous, the weak, the forthright, the wily -- these still abound.

"Gervaise" As Tragedy

The tragedy of Gervaise's life was precisely that her fate was not an accident -- it was inescapable. "Gervaise" belies the Aristotelian notion that a tragedy must concern the fall of some noble person; that tragedy cannot befall an ordinary man, on the ground that to arouse empathy in the observer the hero must fall from a high station. However, the real content of Aristotle's definition of a tragic figure remains valid, if not in the formalistic sense. A tragic hero or heroine must be "sympatico:" he must be a person with admirable qualities, a person whom we can respect. He may not be perfect, however, for then he would not be human. Aristotle is correct in his analysis of these necessary attributes; but, being limited by his social environment, he was not able to see that these attributes are not in the sole possession of kings, queens, gods, goddesses, and the like.

Gervaise fulfills these qualifications remarkably well. She bears her affliction with dignity and clamness; she fights and works with courage and perseverance for her rights, for a good life for herself and her children; she has an intense love and enjoyment of life. Her physical beauty is a reflection of this strength of character. Her "tragic flaw" was not in herself (unless you consider a normal attitude toward sex to be a "tragic flaw"), but, in the circumstances which surrounded her; if she had withstood these circumstances she would have ceased to be a believable human being. It goes without saying, too, that her rescue by a Hollywood-inspired deus ex machina would have completely destroyed the film as tragedy.

Realism -- Hollywood Style

A second notion -- that a work of art can be judged by its artistic merit alone, abstracted from its content -- is also refuted by "Gervaise." A rash of pictures has come out of Hollywood recently which have aimed to depict life as it is lived by ordinary people -- films which have dealt with social problems of various types. What makes "Gervaise" stand so far above these? What gives it its great impact? Not the acting; not the directing; not the photography; not the dialogue nor the construction of the plot. For in all these technical aspects of production, Hollywood can't be beat.

The major defect in Hollywood realism is this: It has no real solution to the problem it treats of, whether they be juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, or the advertising racket. Hollywood treats social problems as personal ones. and solves them on an individual basis. And the problems it does deal with are

are generally of secondary importance, skirting the most fundamental issues posed by man's existence. A good example of Hollywood realism can be found in the creations of Paddy Chayevsky, one of the leading writers in this realistic genre. Take "Marty:" for all its good acting, it is nothing more than a glorified soap opera, somewhat saccharine, slightly unbelievable, with a conveniently happy ending. Hollywood realism is incapable even of hinting at the social basis of the problems it poses. It is a somewhat phony realism; since it cannot admit the social reality behind the appearance of things, and cannot suggest a social solution, the realistic film must end in unmitigated, helpless despair, or it must be given an artificial, contrived ending which steps outside the framework of realism.

Realism With A Class Content

What the realism of "Gervaise" has, that is beyond the reach of the Hollywood producers, is a class content. It is this class content which gives the picture its impetus, its driving force: the story of Gervaise is inextricably bound up with the story of her class -- a class consisting of all types of people, good and bad and all shades between -- a class which seethes and struggles against its fetters, a hopeless struggle as long as it is carried on by isolated individuals. Her fate is theirs.

The rottenness of class society comes through so strongly that even the Fifth Avenue bohemians can hardly miss it. But "Gervaise" does not shout a moral at you: in subtle ways it drives home the point. It is no accident that the only person who retains his integrity throughout is the class-conscious blacksmith. The way out is only suggested, and it might read thus: "No individual, however brave, however well-intentioned, can dig himself out of this morass. If human dignity is to be achieved for the majority of people, and such misery as this abolished, it will be done by the collective action of workers, led by people like the blacksmith."