

# **When We Looked at the World with the Left Eye**

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During the years between the Commune of Paris (1871) and the beginning of the First World War (1914), European socialism had one of its best periods of growth and ideological clarification.

After the demise of the First International with the historical debates of Bakunin and Marx, socialists saw themselves as the righteous heirs to the tradition of the French Revolution (1789). The eloquent criticism by Marx and Engels of modern capitalism became an ideological argument that could debunk Catholic dogma as well as the doctrine of Adam Smith and its economic liberalism. The Second International (1898), in spite of the serious objections of Marx and his most fanatical followers, became a powerful movement that confronted European and North American capitalism.

The growth of socialism in Europe with its heavy anticlericalism and appeal to reason intimidated the Vatican. The Pope issued an Encyclica *Rerum Novarum*. It would become the creed of the Christian-Democratic parties.

## The Joys of Revisionism

Regardless of the revolutionary rhetoric of most social-democratic parties, soon they followed the example of the German Party and chose parliamentary means for social and political change. Only the Russians with Lenin and his cohort persisted in conspiratorial violence and, while waiting for the right “material conditions,” spent their time insulting the European social-democrats. Especially poor Karl Kautsky who for some mysterious reason was the victim of the most vile and obscene insults from Lenin.



The revisionism of LaSalle and Bernstein helped the German Social-Democrats and, in a certain way, the French socialists to compromise. Bismarck used the socialists to consolidate his iron power upon Germany, the German socialists built up a powerful party with a large circulation press, a workers bank, party headquarters, and in every election obtained a strong parliamentary delegation. Soon they managed to vote for workers insurance, disability pensions, paid vacations, and obtained respectability. Even the Kaiser was impressed!

For the French socialists, the compromise was not so shameful. They needed only a claim to be the heirs of the Revolution and the 1848 battles. Republicans, anticlericals, artists and intellectuals embraced socialism with a mystical fervor that was to be tested in the controversial Dreyfus Affair. Alfred Dreyfus, a young Jewish army officer, was accused of high treason. Dreyfus was a part of the Republican efforts to create a new army, loyal to the Republic and able to avenge the debacle of 1871. Officers of this democratic army would be formed by recruiting men from the working and middle classes. The French left was galvanized to defend Dreyfus. Émile Zola, one of the glories of France, united progressive public opinion and saved Dreyfus. The socialists as well, supported the patriotic fervor of France for revenge!

The French left, regardless its performance during the Nazi occupation as the core of the Resistance, collapsed in 1968. The insurrection of students and workers precipitated in confrontations that were a prelude to revolutionary civil war. The government asked the Communist Party for its help. The P.C. complied and persuaded the unions to go back to work.

The successful defense of Dreyfus made the French socialists a most welcome ally of democratic Frenchmen still trying to prevent the Royalists, Catholics, and conservative industrialists from promoting militaristic adventures against the Republic. The brilliant socialist Jean Jaurés asked all European and American socialists to join in a strong resistance against war. The International was to unite the workers for peace and socialism. In congress after congress German and French socialists embraced and proclaimed that they would never fight each other. Everybody cried. But just before war broke out all over Europe Jaurés was murdered and the socialists of Germany and France voted for credits for the war. After that they joined their regiments and went, full of patriotic fervor, to kill their comrades. The Kaiser, with dramatic gestures, told the Deputies in the Reichstag, "From now on I do not recognize parties, only Germans!"

The German left, ideologically convinced of the solid principle of Historical Materialism, with almost 65% of the vote, died an ignoble death in the elections of 1933. The Nazis won only about 34% of the vote. Socialists and Communists, in an absurd tug of war, divided their votes. But beside those sentimental, naive and perhaps well-meaning idiots, there were more realistic and less ideological socialists who, under Constitutional Monarchies went to fight for better conditions for the workers, social programs, health, housing and a real peaceful foreign policy. The Scandinavian countries kept away from the bloody insanity of 1914-18. Sweden became a model of gentle socialism, the first welfare state.

## **The Monarchy and the Red Flag**

And then we have the British socialists with their long history of struggle and organization of the workers. The Labor Party and the Trade Unions Council created a most solid front against the abuses of capitalism. It did not stop the involvement of England in the war, but managed to stay influential 'til the end of the conflict. In 1926 the British working class defied capitalism in the

General Strike. The British working class did not need any German philosophy to go into action with unity and bravery. Since the times of the French Revolution many political clubs with an anarchist style challenged the Tories and the landed aristocracy. The Owen movement fought for male suffrage. And the exercise of that basic democratic weapon helped to obtain favorable laws for the workers.

In 1883 a group of rather prissy British intellectuals, sexual freedom champions and celebrities created the Fabian Society, which in the most simple terms, asserted that socialism would be obtained by pacific, parliamentary methods. At the beginning the group's leadership was in the hands of prolific writers G. Bernard Shaw, Sydney, and Beatrice Webb. Later Lytton Strachey, Virginia Wolff, H.G. Wells and many more joined. They believed that socialism was good manners, and Ladies and Gentlemen should join the wave of the future. Year after year, they produced socialist tracts on all social and political problems. The Fabian lectures were attended by thousands of British. Though with never more than about 9,000 members, the Fabians had an extraordinary influence in the Labor Party. These ultimate mandarins—supreme bureaucrats, after the elections of 1945 single-handedly created the modern British welfare state.

But nothing escaped the analytical minds of the Fabians. Bernard Shaw in an acid, sarcastic piece envisioned the time when working class socialists would kneel in front of the King to be Knighted. This farce was played in real life when Clement Attlee, the red mayor of London, was given the honor. Attlee, still a republican, still singing "Red Flag, was one of the many British socialists to share honors with the most dedicated exploiters of the workers. Only the real working-class heroes, the Beatles, returned their O.B.E. Sydney and Beatrice Webb visited the USSR and, blinded by well-organized propaganda, destroyed the integrity and credibility of the Fabians with the infamous judgement, "We have seen the Future and it works!"

A more keen observer of the human folly, the French writer André Gide, wrote a book, *Return from the USSR*, denouncing the murderous scene in Moscow, the sinister image of Stalin and the intellectual mediocrity of a society controlled by the Secret Police.

It is ironic that today, Bernard Shaw, one of the most prolific and amusing socialist writers, is remembered by "My Fair Lady," the Hollywood version of his "Pygmalion!"

## **An Ever-Expanding Economy of Exploitation**

It was not a coincidence that in 1888 a group of intellectuals founded the Anti-Imperialist League in Boston. The United States was under the influence of European theories about territorial conquest, business opportunities, and as R. Kipling has said, it was the "White Man's Burden." Since the times of the Napoleonic wars, England, France, Germany, Belgium and Holland had sent expeditions to Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America to secure trade monopolies, extraterritorial concessions and all the privileges that artillery can obtain.

Neither Marx nor Lenin understood the significance of imperialism. Firmly obedient to Marxist mantras, they accepted as an article of faith that "Imperialism was the last stage of Capitalism, decadence and war was the fate of the industrialized nations." The final conflict was predictable, it was a matter of a few hours more. Only Rosa Luxemburg contradicted Lenin and analyzed modern imperialism. It was Latin American social-democrats who observed that imperialism, in reality, was the first stage of capitalism. In the Andes countries feudalism survived with remnants of pre-Columbian communal management of the land. Collective forms of social life, the

*Ayllu* or the *ejido*, in no way resembled any European institution during the Middle Ages. From the Philippines to Tanganyika, Buenos Aires to Macao, a new form of entrepreneur appeared, the *compradore*. At first translator, then persuasive voice for foreign commodities to exchange for raw materials, later the active force of international finance.

The colonial partners of imperialism identify completely with the invaders. The *criollos*, *mestizos* “*pied-noir*” spoke in Castilian, French, Oxford English, sent their children to European Universities. and acquired the lifestyle of the colonial masters. Polo, tennis, bridge, cricket. Today it is Rock’n’roll, blue jeans and UCLA English.

American capitalism found immense markets for its junk. Now it is computers, automobiles and the ideology of dynamic progress, or the Alliance for Progress, enforced by the Marines.

The expansionism of the U.S. into the Pacific gave the Anti-Imperialism League the opportunity to mobilize public opinion. After the defeat of Spain, Emilio Aguinaldo organized a national government. But the U.S. took over after Spain and a brutal war of incredible barbarism was launched against the Filipino people. The Anti-Imperialism League denounced the war and, just as many years later in another war in Asia, opposition to the Filipino war was a cause for the American Left. But the U.S. defeated the Filipino nationalists and imposed a benevolent, racist colonialism that would finish only after World War II.

## **End of the Left as a Farce, Not a Tragedy**

Be it the failure of the socialists to prevent World War I or the horror of the Soviet Union, the betrayal of the Revolution in Spain, dogmatic Marxism and its many “chapels,” the Left today in most of the industrialized nations is nostalgia and is in an introspective mood. As Arthur Koestler observed with bitter sarcasm. “We used to believe that Marxism would cure anything from stomach ulcers to impotence.”

Michael Harrington pointed out the paradox that socialism was a victim of its success. Unions became a part of the compromise with capitalism. Workers had an interest in the system. The labor struggles of the '30s and the incredible profits that American industries reaped after World War II made possible better salaries. This created a golden aristocracy of labor, indifferent to social issues, chauvinistic and unable to stop the depreciation of salaries and wages, while upper management controlled the corporations in an international market. Obscene salaries and conspicuous consumption are the new forms of optimism of the ruling class. The ever-expanding economy of capitalism is stuck in competitive blocks from Asia and unified Europe.

Rosa Luxemburg understood that war resulted not only from the need in industrialized countries for markets, but to keep Krupp, Siemens, General Dynamic, Oil, and all conglomerates in firm control of the wealth of the planet.

## **Gompers, the A.F.L., and Debs**

Samuel Gompers attended the conferences of the First International, but as soon as he returned to the U.S.A., he realized that the tactics of socialism and militant unionism were not very intelligent. He preferred union lawyers to radical orators. Gompers disliked the IWW, the socialist press, and especially foreigners involved in American labor politics. Gompers was the

obsession of people like Lenin who feared independent labor unions with only economic goals, that were not political instruments for agit-prop among industrial workers.

Eugene Debs founded a Socialist Party that was to become the ideal Leftist organization in America. With pure ethical principles against war, with an appeal to reason and a large contingent of IWW organizers, Debs ran several times for president. To vote for Debs was some sort of elegant protest, or a form of respect for his integrity. Debs spent time in jail accused of sedition.



Samuel Gompers

The Russian revolution was the event that mobilized the different radical factions of the US into a more militant attitude. To found the Communist Party, the socialists divided one more time. Officially the party was founded in Chicago, on September 1, 1919. The problem was there were two CPs. After the Communists could not agree among rival sects, the Third International suggested that the Americans unite, and later obtain recognition from the mother church in Moscow.

The remaining socialists, not very fond of the Communists, maintained small cells in colleges, among liberal journalists and teachers. Norman Thomas became some sort of a saint, who even today brings out tears to the eyes of romantic liberals. But besides the quarrels among reds, pinkos, fellow-travelers, progressives, liberals and dues-paying FBI infiltrators, the American Left confronted the Great Depression with energy and managed to mobilize large numbers of people in demonstrations and militant actions. A paradoxical observation is that the Okies whom Steinbeck portrayed with great eloquence became the right-wing reactionaries of Orange County.

From the beginning in the early '20s, the CP became an extension of the foreign policy of the USSR. Some of the American volunteers in Spain became instruments in the sordid intrigues of André Marty, the psychopathic Commissar of the International Brigades.

It is possible to point to 1948 as the beginning of the decline of radical politics. In an attempt to revive a form of Popular Front the old Left used Henry Wallace as Presidential candidate. The Left was squashed. The election of Truman marks the opening of the Cold War but also the comical repression of the CP and its fellow-travelers.

The Left, liberals and progressives were intimidated by J. Edgar Hoover and the forces of triumphant, unbridled capitalism. In the USA there was no mobilization of peoples' organizations. Witnesses pointed fingers in the Committee for Un-American Activities. Ronald Reagan started his career and ascent to the Presidency, and many persons in the Arts and Letters soiled their names in an era of shame and defeat.

Meanwhile, all over the USA prosperity gave to the average citizen big cars, juicy hamburgers, and the joys of scientific sex. Amphetamines and valium were on hand for any occasional pain.

## Epilogue as an Epiphany

The final collapse of the USSR and its satellites ended almost one hundred years of ideological fantasies. Scientific socialism based in the 19th Century perception of the universe was more a

European-centered doctrine than an historical view of political and economic development all over the world. Marx was too early for Relativity; Lenin was not interested. But in many parts of Latin America, Africa and especially Asia, Marxism was part of movements of liberation and not the formula for revolution. Historical relativism was Maoism, Third World anti-colonialism and the insurgency of forms of nationalism, like the Islamic movement that looked at Marxism as an aberration of Western decadence.

Some of the metaphysical notions of Marxism, like class solidarity or class consciousness gave a mystical, messianical faith to the Old Left. The New Left, during the '60s and '70s added sexual freedom, the bunk of Eastern religions and a pacifism that is conformism today. It went from ESP to a PhD in Harvard's School of Economics.

After the defeat of the US in Vietnam, the so-called class struggle took the form of a new working class in the underdeveloped countries, in battle against the conglomerate of those nations maniacally obsessed with the control of both markets and raw materials.

Cocaine is the most significant illustration of the ferocity of the combat. Native drug capitalists in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and other countries accumulate fabulous profits, while European and American banks salivate for the expropriation of the production, distribution and consumption of drugs, cocaine, opium, marijuana.

A new stage in the struggle for the capture of all markets and all riches is raging now, taking our planet to an ecological disaster and the breakdown of the organic sources of human biology.

A new optimism is growing. Away from ideological dogma, disdainful of politics and closer to the 19th Century reflections on revolutionary violence.

As Voltaire advised us in *Candide*, "...but now let's cultivate our garden."

## Some Books as a form of Bibliography

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