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A Winter's Tale Told in Memoirs (on the history of the US SWP)

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THIS ESSAY IS dedicated to the memory of George Breitman (1916-86), who taught me never to take anyone's word for it.

THE SOCIALIST WORKERS (SWP), now a curious sidebar in the history of radicalism, is a linear descendant of the political movement initiated in the United States by pro-Bolshevik followers of Leon Trotsky on the eve of the Great Depression. [[1](#)] For 45 years, until the mid-1970s, the movement associated with the SWP was at the crossroads of the Far Left.

Although smaller in numbers than the Communist Party, and often the Socialist Party, the SWP enjoyed a moral authority, political acuity and signal professionalism that brought it disproportionate influence in the union movement and Marxist culture that lasted for decades. Today, few young activists in factories, the community or on campuses have even heard of the SWP.

What happened to this flawed but in many ways vibrant and inspiring organization? By 2011, the SWP has changed its political line domestically and internationally more often than Lady Gaga switches outfits at a performance. (The analogy is particularly apt inasmuch as Gaga's costumes become more outrageous as the evening goes on.) At the least, the SWP is an organization that can no longer be filed under "T" for "Trotskyism"; the letter should in all probability be "C" for "Cults (Political)."

Jack Whittier Barnes (b. 1940), the Party's national secretary, inhaled a version of Cannonism in the 1960s and exhaled a version of Castroism in the late 1970s. This alone would not be critical. But Barnes, whose style is more Wall Street Chairman of the Board than revolutionary firebrand, had the

skill to mesmerize consecutive circles of talmidim — members of the SWP Political Committee and National Committee — to replicate their supervisor's every gesture.

Except for a few old-timers in 1981, leaders of the SWP exhibited no dissent, and mostly genuine zeal, as they embraced an optimistic perspective of permanent student radicalization (1971), sterile orthodox "Leninist-Trotskyism" (1973), a "turn to the working class" (1976-79), a "turn within the turn" (1981), and increasing ruptures with Trotskyist theories and affiliations (most explicit in 1982 and 1990). At this point, CEO Barnes is nearly the sole survivor at the top, having beguiled budding new layers of SWP junior executives to purge their predecessors through procedures that would give even the appellation "Kangaroo Court" a bad name.

Two Recent Books

There are surely valid reasons for questioning the SWP's earlier, pre-1970s, internal life from the point of view of permitting wide-ranging democratic debate. [2] But the two recent memoirs, *Outsider's Reverie* and *North Star*, by SWP veterans Leslie Evans (b. 1942) and Peter Camejo (1939-2008), indicate a creeping crescendo to bizarre authoritarianism after Barnes consolidated his reign in 1972. [3]

This was not accomplished single-handedly. For the years immediately before and decades after, the varying individuals backed by Barnes for leadership positions in the SWP more and more operated as a political aristocracy and secret society, a "Bolshevik" version of the Skull and Bones. There are surely unique and particular facets of the rise and fall of the SWP, but the reader familiar with the history of other political organizations (not all of them Left-wing) will be tempted to quote Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself but it does rhyme." [4]

The narratives by Evans and Camejo also indicate that the group finally went over the edge in some qualitative way during the 1980s. One gets the sense that the SWP has become a creepy sect claiming to be "communist" but operationally suggestive of the Church of Scientology. This is certainly the impression communicated by the online postings of former members. [5]

There are also two more widely-read sources, the only instances of significant public exposure granted in the media to the SWP of late. The first is a 2007 amusing piece of journalism in the *New York Observer*, "Communists Capitalize on Village Sale," describing the \$1.8 million purchase by the vice president of SONY BMG Music Entertainment of a Manhattan loft belonging to Party leaders Jack Barnes and Mary-Alice Waters. The article mentions Barnes' admiration for the late despot Kim Il-sung. [6]

The second is a 2009 widely-reviewed book, Said Sayrafiedeh's *When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir of a Political Childhood*. [7] The author, the disillusioned son of two long-time SWP cadres, claims that there was a cover-up regarding his sexual abuse by an older member. If only one-tenth of Sayrafiedeh's overall portrait of the dismal and deluded lives of rank-and-filers is true, North Korea may serve not only as a template for Barnes' personal leadership aspirations but also as a fitting index of the brand of "socialism" experienced by recent SWPers.

The depictions of the SWP in all these sources show a sea-change from the portraits available in scholarly books treating the record of Trotskyism in its first decades. They also contradict the sober and flattering report published in *The Nation* in 1975 by Walter and Miriam Schneir in connection with the SWP's impressive lawsuit against illegal police surveillance and harassment. [8] What is being drowned out in this historical "rhyme" of the recent SWP, a blend of Creflo Dollar Ministries for its top guns and a vintage 1900 sweatshop for believers, is an honorable political past.

What Was Trotskyism?

A distinctive stance of the Trotskyists was that the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule resulted from a necessary 1917 revolutionary upheaval that underwent a harsh bureaucratization in the 1920s — a defeat without, however, a complete reversal of the revolution. The Communist League of America (CLA) was founded in 1928 as a public faction of the Third International to promote corrective policies. In 1934, the CLA merged with A. J. Muste's American Workers Party to create the Workers Party of the United States. In 1936, the Trotskyists entered the Socialist Party to become the "Appeal Group."

By this time, Trotskyists aimed to elaborate a full-blown alternative vision of Marxism to Stalinism and social democracy. The new élan was expounded perhaps most colorfully in a declaration of cultural and intellectual autonomy called "[Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art](#)." [9]

In 1938, the same year that the SWP came into existence, a Fourth International that united followers of Trotsky worldwide was announced. In 1940, the new party and its youth group (the Young Peoples Socialist League/Fourth International), totaling nearly 2,000 members, split just about in half due to organizational and political divergences.

After that time, the organization retaining the name SWP was customarily referred to as "Cannonite" in recognition of the authority of its principal leader, James P. Cannon (1890-1974). [10] In the post of national secretary, Cannon guided the SWP until his retirement in California in 1953, after which his title was national chairman emeritus.

The political ambitions of the SWP in the Cannon years were mostly overshadowed by the commanding position of the Communist Party (CPUSA) on the Left. Suddenly, in 1956, the CPUSA's influence, already weakened by the Cold War and McCarthyism, was shattered by the revelations of Stalin's abuses in Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

It seemed, then, that a new radicalization would give the SWP a "second chance" to realize its revolutionary Marxist strategy. With the CPUSA under a cloud there might be a larger hearing for Trotsky's method and set of positions based on "The Transitional Program" adopted by the founding congress of the Fourth International. [11]

A Second Chance

What happened to that second chance and that historic program is to an extent recounted in the two autobiographical books that inspired this essay. Evans, who grew up in Los Angeles as something of an autodidact, was a thoughtful and conscientious writer, editor, and China specialist for the SWP, and a founder of *Against the Current* (new series) in 1986. Camejo, the U.S.-born son of wealthy Venezuelans and a student at MIT, was a hilarious and inspiring public speaker. He was the SWP presidential nominee in 1976, and, after 2002, a frequent candidate for office of the Green Party.

The two authors are strikingly dissimilar in backgrounds, personalities, and especially their post-SWP political trajectories. Evans is no longer a Marxist and has evolved toward mainstream politics, a fascination with the paranormal, and intense neighborhood activism. Camejo died a militant fighter for fundamental social change, putting in years leading the North Star Network, then building the Rainbow Coalition and Committees of Correspondence.

Both, however, tell a similarly sad "Winter's Tale" that narrates the betrayal of idealistic individuals

(i.e. themselves) by Barnes, a graduate student in economics who gained control of the SWP when the Cannon-era leaders were stepping aside. On the other hand, these books present much more than a report on the mid-20th century SWP. Included are the authors' pre-SWP adventures and later careers (at the UCLA International Institute for Evans and the Merrill Lynch Group for Camejo). Readers who want to learn about the full contents, too extensive to be fairly recapitulated in this essay, are referred to the excellent blow-by-blow summary available online by Paul Le Blanc, an informed historian of the SWP. [\[12\]](#)

It might be noted at the outset that these two books may be outstanding as historical sources but not for revelations of new political plans regarding "what is to be done." Both authors accepted and then rejected the peculiar construal of "Leninism" promoted by the SWP, a narrow interpretation of a fertile if paradoxical legacy long criticized by Marxists in the pages of *Against the Current* and elsewhere. [\[13\]](#)

Evans and Camejo are articulate and impassioned advocates of their own political conclusions about the desirability of and strategy for social transformation, and these are also quite different from what appears in the pages of this journal. Evans now endorses standard challenges to revolutionary thought, and Camejo champions familiar clichés of the populist Left. There is little point in rehashing established differences of opinion about reform versus revolution, the strategy of rank-and-file labor caucuses, and so on. Instead, this essay will try to move the conversation forward with observations about what exactly is achieved as well as still missing in these memoirs.

Why devote any time and energy at all to analyzing the evolution of what has become a deteriorating sect? Surely the future for the Left is not behind us. But the point of any such journey into the past is not that knowledge of this political history will set us free; rather, knowledge increases wisdom that might assist the building of a new socialist presence incorporating worthy essentials of Trotskyism.

To be sure, the perpetual small size of organized revolutionary movements is worrisome to anyone aspiring to change a society of millions; the SWP reached a membership of a few thousand only at certain moments. Yet the ideas for which a movement stands are what count in the long run. Commitment to abolitionism, social security and feminism were also once derided as the preoccupations of a nutty minority who were marginal to the American "mainstream."

The Rise of the SWP

A few notes about the SWP's early history, prior to the years narrated by the memoirs of Evans and Camejo, remind us that dedicated small groups with compelling ideas can constructively advance Left movements and political strategy.

In 1934, Trotskyist cadres directed a strike of Teamsters in Minneapolis. This led to the organization of over-the-road drivers and was pivotal in the development of industrial unionism. In 1936, Trotskyism aroused many of the editors of and contributors to the pro-Communist New York journal *Partisan Review* to embark on a new course. The revamped magazine after 1937 blended revolutionary Marxist politics and Modernist sensibilities to become the most eminent literary magazine in the country.

In the 1940s, the SWP navigated the perilous waters of an inter-imperialist war in which there were no good choices. [\[14\]](#) With socialist transformation an out-of-reach objective at that moment, the SWP formulated the "proletarian military policy," a practical orientation that combined revolutionary internationalist politics with participation in the armed battle to stop fascism. [\[15\]](#)

Postwar, the SWP went on the offensive in the labor movement and also endorsed a memorable statement of Marxist politics in regard to African Americans that was penned by C. L. R. James. [16] In the 1950s the SWP fought the good fight against McCarthyism and U.S. Cold War foreign policy. But its eyes were wide open concerning the inhumanity of expanding Stalinist dictatorships as the Party championed the workers' uprisings in East Germany and Hungary.

When radicalization surged in the early 1960s, the SWP like most Left groups benefitted from a tide of activism that lifted all boats. Nevertheless the SWP, still "Cannonite" but now led by Farrell Dobbs, Tom Kerry and Murray Weiss, made exceptional use of several of the new openings.

A critical factor was the political experience of veterans of the 1930s and 1940s, salt-of-the-earth type people who had built unions, served in the military, and produced skillful writings on labor history, Black politics, philosophy and political theory. Some of these were deeply embedded in local labor and anti-racist struggles in places such as Detroit, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Others were willing to relocate to New York to staff coalitions (such as the Fair Play for Cuba Committee) and the SWP national office.

Always a magnet for talented workers and intellectuals (some of whom, like Harry Braverman and Bert Cochran, broke away to write classics of the Left such as *Labor and Monopoly Capital* [1974] and *Labor and Communism* [1977]), the SWP cadre formulated and implemented a cogent perspective for a new generation of rebels.

Hundreds of young people, in their teens and twenties with astonishing levels of energy and commitment, were thus drawn to the SWP's youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA). They fervently acquired a revolutionary internationalist outlook but were trained to translate long-term aspirations into a sane set of practical activities, ones appealing to people not yet fully radicalized nor as privileged in background as many of the new recruits from schools such as Carleton College, MIT and Northwestern University.

The SWP strategy included running socialist electoral candidates, independent of the major political parties, whose activities were subordinate to movement-building. The crowning achievement was the SWP's approach to building a massive anti-Vietnam War campaign, including dissident GIs, that made full use of constitutional rights and welcomed any ally who supported "Bring the Troops Home Now" or "Out Now." These slogans were judged to be "transitional demands" that addressed the population at its current level of consciousness while also aiding self-determination for Vietnam, the weakening of imperialism, and a growing awareness of the power of mass action. [17]

Old and New Radicalisms

The SWP had its detractors, especially due to its reliance on a sometimes mechanically-deployed democratic centralism in the mass movements, and not every SWP intervention on the ground was carried out in a flawless manner. But the YSA and SWP got many things right at a time when it was not easy.

As the later 1960s heated up, the New Left was torn apart. The ever-present lure of "lesser evil" politics drew many activists back into the dead-end electoralism of the Democratic Party. Others sought shortcuts through elitist violent action; made foolish declarations of allegiance to dictatorships in China, North Vietnam, and Albania (!); and indulged in ultraleft fantasies of orthodox "Leninist" and "proletarian" purity.

The SWP affirmed the right of self-defense against racists; the necessity of militant mobilization of

the majority to change society; the understanding of socialist democracy as an extension and completion of existing, hard-earned political freedoms; a clear distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism; the centrality of uninhibited expression of diverse ideas (“workers’ democracy”) to building social movements; and the obligation to defend anti-colonial and anti-imperialist rebellions without abandoning one’s critical faculties.

The SWP in the 1960s was burdened by its own orthodox carry-overs from a bygone era. This included an inflated notion of itself as a Leninist “vanguard party,” and the admirable, if erroneous, conviction that the people of the Soviet Union would free themselves of police-state rule while retaining the USSR’s nationalized property relations. But the SWP of those years seemed to be equally interested in learning from new movements as shown by its sincere embrace of Malcolm X, welcoming attitude toward the Cuban Revolution and socialist-feminism, and adoption of the “Red University” strategy promoted by students in Belgrade and Paris.

The SWP stood on the cusp of a potentially fruitful blend of old and new radicalisms expressed in more advanced form by its international co-thinkers in the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec, with which the SWP had fraternal relations), especially in France (the Revolutionary Communist League), England (the International Marxist Group), and Mexico (the Revolutionary Workers Party).

On the negative side, the SWP was rightly treated with some political suspicion in the USec due to its record in the 1950s as an ally of Gerry Healey’s Socialist Labor League in England (which evolved into a dangerous lunatic outfit) and Pierre Lambert’s International Communist Party in France (later the International Communist Organization, and likewise a sectarian horror). Yet the SWP turned out to be in advance of many of the USec leaders, some of whom had in their own troubled past associations with Michel Pablo, on subjects such as Women’s Liberation and the danger of adaptation to the disastrous guerrilla warfare practices in several Latin American countries. [\[18\]](#)

Above all, the SWP in the United States, free of the blinders of Stalinism and liberalism, opened the door for new members to a world of thought-provoking ideas and an understanding of what SWP educator George Novack referred to as “the long view of history.” [\[19\]](#) Not only did the personal lives of older members embody class struggles of many decades, but their bookshelves were lined with fascinating volumes. What better way to learn than through a combination of theory and practice?

A new recruit was encouraged to start with the classics of Marxism and labor history. Then, unless one was cowed by ideological Rottweilers (such deviation detectives can be found in every political and religious group), the intellectually curious could move on to broader understandings of Marxism by reading the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Lukacs, and British Marxist historians.

Communists seemed to be fixated on hootenannies and historical novels by Howard Fast, while phobic about reading Arthur Koestler, Hannah Arendt and Ralph Ellison. The SWP tradition forcefully eschewed the judging of culture by political criteria; one could be a socialist activist with unfettered access to the full breadth of modern thought in literature, art and music.

For a small number of SWP members, the icing on the Marxist cultural cake in the late 1960s and 1970s was found in the luminous pages of *New Left Review*. There one encountered the very best in contemporary Trotskyist thought — Ernest Mandel, Isaac Deutscher, Tariq Ali, Perry Anderson, Sheila Rowbotham, Terry Eagleton, Michael Löwy — side-by-side with the creative Marxism generated by Fredric Jameson, Louis Althusser, Ellen Wood, Juliet Mitchell, and many more. [\[20\]](#)

To be sure, one could pass through the SWP’s open door to Marxist culture in different ways,

according to the needs and desires of the particular personalities who joined. On the one hand, there was an orthodoxy in the SWP about “dialectical materialism” and a partisan take on a series of legendary factional struggles in Trotskyism, often involving theories connected with the experience of the Russian Revolution.

Cannon’s writings on these matters, often a compelling read, were elevated to the secular script of U.S. Trotskyism. If one aspired to move forward up the ladder to salaried posts and leadership positions, which brought modest perks of movement wages, status as an insider, and the deference (sometimes approaching groupie-like awe) of some rank-and-filers, one needed to at least publically assent to SWP teachings. Others could operate without restraint in exploring and discussing heterodox ideas about history, philosophy, anthropology and so forth.

The Crucible of Crisis

Frequently, after the founders die, a movement becomes a pale imitation of itself. That is not true for the SWP, which has now morphed into a scary, if harmless, aberration known for its fabulous real estate deals and round-the-clock trials of baffled members. How could the SWPers allow the makeover to go as far as it did?

When one looks back, after-the-fact, to the onset of schizophrenia, political or otherwise, one searches out the early signs and stages. “Barnesism” evolved through a series of decisions, not just one, but opinions differ about where to start and how to periodize the stages.

Evans mentions some disquieting events in the 1960s involving the treatment of “The Weiss Group,” but he and Camejo are most disparaging of Barnesism in the late 1970s, when they were cast out of the leadership. For me, in contrast to Evans and Camejo, the whole sequence of transformation comes together most coherently if one gives special consideration to the events of 1971, airbrushed in both books. At that time there was a sizeable membership revolt expressly against the emergent Barnes machine.

The date and historical circumstance of this multi-generational rebellion are imperative for any complete rethinking of the post-1960s process. Evans and Camejo eventually conclude, from opposing angles, that the ideology of Trotskyism is itself largely responsible for the SWP debacle. That’s not much more useful than concluding that the ideology of Catholicism is to blame for pedophile priests.

Most Marxist critics of the SWP cite two other factors: 1) The failure of the radicalization to continue unfolding after 1975, which prolonged the SWP’s isolation from the working class and its culture, ensuring that the leadership would be handed over to students with no proletarian experience; and 2) Barnes’ 1978-79 misreading of the dynamics of the Nicaraguan Revolution, instigating his leap to Castroism sui generis as the fulcrum of a new political strategy. (Camejo also shares Barnes’ uncritical assessment of the Cuban Communist Party, but draws different practical conclusions.)

In 1971, however, this perfect storm did not yet obtain: “Objective conditions” were still very favorable to SWP growth; the transition from a working class to an inexperienced student leadership was far from complete; and orthodox Trotskyist theories about “permanent revolution” and the necessity of a Transitional Program were in place, at least on paper.

Nevertheless, in the process of the internal political struggle in 1971, the crucial changes occurred that created the new paradigms for handling disputes and precedents for organizational control; the positive traditions of the SWP were shown to be subject to the expedient aims of the new leadership.

In other words, the 1971 convention was a “test run.” The patterns it set would be more fully enacted when Barnes and his circle went on to change policies and expel organized oppositions in 1974 and 1982-3, and target other individuals, such as Camejo, along the way and afterwards.

Putting historical proportion aside, imagine trying to assess the 1927 expulsion of Trotsky from the Communist Party of the USSR without consideration of the 1921 ban on factions, one that Trotsky himself supported. While material conditions and programmatic alterations are necessary factors in understanding the whole SWP process, they are also insufficient. A closer look at 1971 reminds us that greater attention must be paid to the internal culture of the SWP as an incubator of later developments. Yet culture is unlike political documents and quantifiable data; a discussion of this matter is tricky.

Rethinking 1971

The 1971 SWP convention was hyper-factionalized compared to the one in 1969. In 1971, an enthusiastic and overwhelming majority ratified a political analysis presented on behalf of the Political Committee by Barnes that predicted a permanent deepening and spread of the 1960s student radicalization as the premise for its strategy. [\[21\]](#) An opposition, nearly 10% of the membership and calling itself “The Proletarian Orientation Tendency” (P.O.), proposed a reorientation to working-class concerns and encouraged the industrial colonization of non-student members.

Each side believed zealously that it was out to “save” the SWP. Unfortunately, what occurred was not a reasoned debate on these subjects. Barnes and his allies went on the offensive, alleging that the real policy of the opposition was “economist” (adapting to the prejudice of backward workers) and opposed to the new mass movements (hence bending to the ultraleft workerism of rival Left groups). The opposition, in turn, was quick to see Barnes’ supporters as specimens of instantaneous group-think, and a few P.O. supporters even imagined (erroneously) that they were taking the part of Cannon in a re-runs of earlier disputes with Max Shachtman in 1939-40 and Bert Cochran in 1953-54.

Why such a warfare mentality on both sides? The answer is that almost everyone understood even before the pre-convention discussion that the P.O. represented a layer of members who were distrustful of Barnes, his personal circle, and his methods. The documents meant exactly what they said, that the historic proletarian orientation (i.e. a top priority on labor activities; the encouragement of available members to join industrial unions) of the SWP was disintegrating, but there was a motivation for putting forward an organized tendency around this idea.

P.O. supporters thought that Barnes was promoting friends and followers into top positions in the organization, mostly individuals who had moved directly from the university campus to the SWP apparatus. The P.O. feared that the result would be an immediate change in SWP leadership from Dobbs and Kerry to Barnes and his allies. This would largely bypass the more seasoned, relatively diverse layer of individuals with experience going back to the late 1940s and 1950s.

The P.O., adhering to the view that debate over political program takes precedence over organizational grievances, did not attack Barnes and his circle by name. But the P.O.’s call for a return to the earlier tradition, with its working-class orientation and hallowed place for union activists, made the same point.

The P.O., however, was loose, decentralized, heterogeneous and unfinished; it was a sincere political tendency, not a disguised faction, and was not designed to compete with the startling degree of

homogenization and organizational clout exhibited by the SWP Political Committee.

One small but visible strand within the P.O. opposition was inspired by Larry Trainor (1905-1975) in Boston. Trainor was a classic Old School "Cannonite" who idealized the working class and probably thought that all students, Barnes especially, should "take a bath in the proletariat" to be cleansed of their middle-class backgrounds. Most of the opposition had never seen the legendary Trainor and did not share that view, but three of the four authors of the major P.O. documents emerged under Trainor's tutelage.

More common with the non-Trainorites among the P.O. adherents was the feeling that a mechanistic formula for campus work was being imposed by a super-centralizing National Office. In the Bay Area, it seemed that SWP and YSA organizers, instead of evolving from local leaders of campus and community-based struggles, were transplanted from the center and constantly on the phone to New York for guidance.

In the Oakland/Berkeley branch the P.O. supporters were mostly young people in their early twenties, including the SWP/YSA activists in the Third World movements, who identified with rebel students throughout the world. Probably unlike Trainor et al, they felt a growing attraction to the French JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth) for its spontaneity and dissenting behavior, and its increasingly aggressive attempts to link up with unions and working-class youth in 1968. Barnes was seen as milking the campuses for whatever they were worth to accumulate newly-radicalized "soldiers" for deployment in his increasingly conformist political machine.

What united the P.O., however, was a belief that class composition was central to a socialist organization and pivotal to recruiting more people of color. The P.O. also imagined that an increased presence in local union struggles would be a counter-weight to the increasing bureaucracy in the New York SWP National Office, ultimately laying the groundwork for socialist participation in the rank-and-file labor rebellions about to come.

We thought that within a few years, by the mid-1970s, the SWP might have the political allegiance of hundreds of experienced, multinational activists in auto, steel, transport, public workers' unions, AFSCME, and so on, which would create an organization of "real people" (not ex-students masquerading as "worker Bolsheviks") that would surely be a magnet for outstanding cultural workers and scholars as well.

In the framework of P.O.'s vision, a call to send available cadres into unions was an expansive activity, a way to extend and deepen the SWP's reach. I see it now as a cobbled blend of traditional Cannonism with the up-and-coming ideas in the USec about a "new mass vanguard." Barnes, already cultivating the view (perhaps with some help from Farrell Dobbs) of SWP members as troops in his army, could only treat such a proposal as a diversion, an abandonment of a strategy that was providing quick returns on an investment. [22]

No doubt there were more subtle ways of signing on to Barnes' perspective, which was endorsed nearly unanimously by the national leadership and ninety per cent of the membership. Some of the written contributions on behalf of the SWP majority were thoughtful and compelling arguments to think creatively. Still, in debates on the branch floor, where passions ran high, P.O. supporters were sometimes called "racist" and "reactionary."

To us it seemed that Barnes' followers were combining a dreary version of "Bolshevization" with a hyped-up student orientation. The debate was overwhelmingly bipolar from Day One, both sides holding their positions like fixed bayonets. For novices, joining a political opposition tendency in the SWP was something of a bungee jump. I had no idea that Barnes and others aspiring to take over the

leadership from the “Old Guard,” the veterans of the 1930s-50s era, would see the debate as a first class opportunity to hone their skills in knife fighting.

Nor was I aware that the P.O., which never thought in terms of winning a majority but only slowing down the march of the Barnes Group, lacked a strategy to prevent an escalation of the debate to an all-or-nothing crisis. This proved to be decisive as the P.O. let itself be maneuvered into presenting its miscellaneous texts (too many of which were quotations from old books and SWP documents) into a full-fledged counter-resolution, in order to have formal speaking time to defend itself.

Bitter Fruits of Factionalism

Following the convention, Barnes and his circle orchestrated a behind-the-scenes campaign to ostracize the opposition through sleazy organizational practices, including the denial of national committee representation, select removal of dissidents from the YSA, and the flooding of branches with supporters of the majority.

The belief was widespread among the younger members of Barnes’ allies and followers that those who voted in opposition, including Trainor, were a roadblock and dispensable, although several of the Old Guard members in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, privately made gestures of comradeship to individuals in the P.O.

In response to Barnes, a few of the initiators of the P.O. announced themselves a new “Leninist Faction.” Whether they had already been thinking along those ultraleft lines, or were mainly traumatized by Barnes’ capacity to demonize them, was never entirely clear; probably it was a bit of both. In hindsight, however, one can see that class composition was neither the sole cause of the disease starting to infect the SWP nor its automatic cure; a sectarian post-Lenin “Leninist” mentality that several of the P.O. supporters (those who next created “The Class Struggle League” or joined Vanguard Newsletter) shared with Barnes actually made them “Brothers and Sisters Under the Skin.” [23]

There is a tangled web of causes for behavior such as this, and the SWP must be treated a phenomenon of its times. My own “Winter’s Tale” is not a story about cynical leaders, mindless acolytes and innocent oppositionists, at least in the early years. In 1971 all paid the price of polemic, too busy scoring points to hear what others were saying. [24] Nor do I have any use for an “orthodox Trotskyist” theological exegesis that describes the SWP’s expulsion from a political Eden after succumbing to the temptations of programmatic revisionism.

A generous interpretation of what occurred in 1971 is that the SWP’s well-earned success in building the movement against the war in Vietnam was disorienting to its leaders in a predictable fashion. Victories, even very limited ones, have the capacity to beget overreaching ambition. The modest recruitment of student activists produced the hubris that the emerging SWP leadership had figured out a formula to break from its post-1940s isolation, once and for all. Budding leaders, not just Barnes, who was fully supported by the Old Guard, began to believe that the new SWP had wings.

Was There An Alternative?

Yet what ensued over the next decade was not predictable as the result of hubris, inasmuch as an overoptimistic perspective can be corrected with a truly representative and independent-thinking collective leadership. That failure of organizational culture constitutes much of the grounds for

further discussion of the meaning of 1971 at this point — not a tedious rehash of why one line was “correct” and the other “incorrect.”

Barnes in particular seemed to think that the Party could be played like a piano: Just pick a political milieu key here and the right recruitment notes come out there. Like the proverbial man with a big hammer, every problem looked like a nail. His view of the SWP membership as the troops of a “Big Red Machine,” to be deployed by SWP generals, was clearly shared by others at the outset, although most eventually fell under its wheels.

The variant of “democratic centralism” that seemed to pay off in mass movement work was increasingly employed within the organization; in contrast to groups such as the LCR (France) and the International Marxist Group (Britain), the SWP Political Committee and National Committee faced the membership as a homogeneous block, and the majority of the SWP took the same approach to political minorities (who were doomed if they didn’t toe an increasingly impossible line).

This worked for a short time, and, even after flying too close to the sun produced repeated meltings, a core group of SWP “hards” continued to stick by its leader. Then the SWP turned to a desperate self-cannibalism to mask palpable failures; in the 1980s and 1990s many of these “hards” were expelled for minor infractions (such as not changing jobs on command) and others retreated from formal membership to a new category of SWP Supporters who gave money in return for periodic reports of inside information.

By 2011, Barnes has supervised this process of relentless shrinkage of membership (to fewer than 100 people) and political credibility (to zero) for 35 years. To read the current *Militant* is to see how the aging magician has turned the yawning emptiness of the SWP into perfunctory celebrations of imaginary victories. Surely there are fine people still drawn to the SWP, but integration into its subculture renders them mental and emotional prisoners of illusions as lethal as those befalling Shakespeare’s Leontes.

Was there a feasible alternative, a strategy by which the SWP might have retained its moral and political authority, and perhaps survived into the new millennium with a membership, say, the current size of the International Socialist Organization (ISO)? [\[25\]](#) There are too many “ifs” in any post facto scenario to stake a compelling claim on a particular strategy of retrospective redemption, although a proletarian orientation and diversity of views are certainly desirable.

Still, if one wished to defeat the ideas of Barnes in 1971, when the takeover by the Barnes Group was incomplete and radicalization still on the upswing, a better idea was required. Here it must be acknowledged that a major flaw in the P.O. opposition was that its idealization of the older SWP proletarian tradition was backward-looking.

Years later one might smugly point out that the 1960s student radicalization ended shortly after the 1971 convention, but no one predicted that at the time. The P.O. couldn’t provide a satisfactory analysis of how to understand the coming decade, partly because it remained too much in the framework of an outmoded form of politics. [\[26\]](#)

In the meantime, Barnes effectively tapped into a genuine optimism about new opportunities beyond traditional working-class venues in the coming period. The SWPers who supported him, young and old, believed that their future as a leading socialist group was as secure as an investment with Bernie Madoff seemed to be during the 1990s.

And the P.O. had other big problems for which it was unprepared. The Barnes group successfully shifted the grounds of discussion from political ideas to beliefs about one’s “real” motives— the

claim that certain individuals were prejudiced against the new manifestations of radicalism, were anti-Party, and echoing political rivals of the SWP. I was personally unfamiliar with the “Trainorites” from Boston; for all I knew, they might have been axe murderers. Suddenly Barnes’ supporters were attributing outrageous oral statements to them, as well as to P.O. supporters in Texas, Cleveland and so on.

In the absence of any apparatus to investigate or double-check such allegations, what should one believe? Should one defend unknown allies on faith? Remain silent in the face of possible slanders? Respond in kind? Even in Oakland/Berkeley, where I had been YSA Organizer and actually lived in the apartment inside the SWP headquarters for a year, it was impossible to know the secret heart of every individual and the precise nature of his or her commitment to the SWP.

If the P.O. perspective won a small foothold of representation in the SWP’s leading committees (which I naively believed to be the norm for a sizable tendency), which members would be willing to uproot themselves from jobs and communities to operate out of a New York office? The more one is demonized by an organization, the less willing one becomes to turn one’s life upside down on its behalf.

Ralph Levitt was prominent from the case of the “Bloomington Three,” YSA members indicted under an anti-Communist law who might have landed in prison. Levitt had political smarts far above the rest of us and was a powerful speaker in the old school — crisp, disciplined and eloquent. But now he was working long hours in mass transit with shifts during many branch meeting times; we saw him less and less.

Bill Massey, employed in a warehouse, was an extraordinary activist, open-minded, and an all-around mensch. Surely Bill would do anything required, but no one saw him as a natural leader to the degree of Levitt, to whom he looked as well. And then there were a growing number of oppositionists in Oakland/Berkeley who seemed born to rant.

Edmond E. DiTullio was a Korean War veteran and one-time professor of Asian History turned bus driver. A self-proclaimed follower of Chinese Trotskyist Peng Shu Tse, Ed saw every motion at a branch meeting as a potential fire on which he might throw gasoline. Eventually Ed joined a microfaction that split. But Ed had a heart of gold and a complete identification with the working class.

Some additional P.O. supporters began to mouth extreme views about the SWP’s “degeneration” with a rage and arrogance that went beyond the logical dynamic of an opposition becoming the mirror image of the more out-of-control Barnes supporters. It gradually became evident that some of the P.O. adherents, including sadly an outstanding veteran auto worker, had developed ties to repellant political rivals of the SWP, such as the Workers League and Spartacist League. This development vindicated the worst accusations of the Majority, that the P.O. was disloyal and ultimately sectarian. [27]

The Man of the Apparatus

Novelist Raymond Chandler, a master of depicting lofty principles mired in the muck of opportunism, observed that “The tragedy of life...is not that the beautiful things die young, but that they grow old and mean.” [28] Whatever he was as an idealistic young radical on the campuses of Carleton and Northwestern, and in the early days of the YSA, Jack Barnes evinced such upsetting changes by age 30.

Unfortunately, this “Man of the Apparatus” remains gray in both Leslie Evans’ and Peter Camejo’s accounts. I have never been able to quite understand his persuasive powers and wish that these two books helped more. One can’t even determine the extent to which Barnes “seized” power, or like Gaius Julius Caesar, had power thrust upon him by those aspiring to escape responsibility (the party Old Guard?).

Evans, who provides many details about Barnes’ behavior, claims perhaps too simplistically that Barnes’ appeal from the outset was because “in politics, [he was] hard, ruthless, and unyielding. That was what attracted us to him....Barnes meant to build a different kind of organization, as hard and mean as himself.” [29]

I can only imagine that such an “attraction” was on the part of individuals fixated on a variant of the Maoist proverb that “A revolution is not a tea party.” Such types may have forsaken the sipping of tea in favor of chugging Barnes’ Homemade Brew, but, without knowing it, they drank from a poisoned chalice.

To what extent was the phenomenon of “Barnesism” due to collective thinking? Was Barnes simply barking orders from the top or was there real give-and-take with several of his Carleton classmates, such as Doug Jenness, Larry Siegel, and Mary-Alice Waters? To what extent were the gifted MIT recruits, Camejo, Barry Sheppard and Gus Horowitz, in the innermost sanctum? Neither memoir tells much about that aspect, although I expect that many individuals were complicit in political and organizational practices now too-readily attributed to Barnes alone.

As for the Old Guard, their time was running out; having either made their choice or accepted their fate, the investment in Barnes was as enormous as it was improvident. First they idealized the Barnes Group to the SWP membership, seeing only the sunny half of the half-truths of its purported achievements; then they adhered to this emotional outlay come what may. Into the late 1970s, Kerry and others defended their faith against contrary evidence by acquiescing in (or in some cases instigating?) the demonization of Barnes’ critics.

In 1971 Barnes lured most of the Old Guard, without a great deal of difficulty, into joining him in a fight against what some of us saw as the best of their own proletarian past. In 1973, he switched his approach and held out a chance for them to embrace a less savory segment of that same history by re-enacting the great 1953 battle against “Pabloism” that was allegedly reborn in the leadership of the USec. This blast-from-the-past was catnip to the Old Guard; none stood outside the grandiosely-named “Leninist-Trotskyist Faction” (LTF).

Only three years after the dissolution of the LTF, Barnes (substituting an ultra-sectarian Castroism for a mildly sectarian Trotskyism) launched his purge of the vast majority of the same Old Guard. This surely constitutes his immortal moment, his Lilliputian place in radical history. There is no need to go into detail as several books from the early 1990s have documented the events. [30] At this point I will channel the late Ed DiTullio by indulging in a two-sentence rant of my own:

“How could the SWP Political Committee expel George and Dorothea Breitman, George Weissman, Frank and Sarah Lovell, James Kutcher, Nat and Sylvia Weinstein, Jean Tussey, Asher and Ruth Harer, and so many more? Barnes’ treatment of these women and men, who had devoted their lives to building the SWP that he hijacked, can only be compared to a hyena ripping to pieces an ensnared but living antelope.”

The Uses of Autobiography

Evans and Camejo communicate some of the dynamics leading to this outrage, but there is an inestimable difference in the quality of the two books. Evans mostly displays fabulous literary gifts. Already in his days in the SWP, he had the skill to make a case in an unruffled and well thought-out fashion; the capacity to give the other side its due; and the ability to steer clear of heated prose and derision while making a contentious claim.

His greatest contribution in *Outsider's Reverie* is that he places several of the pivotal thinkers (Hansen, Novack, Breitman) in their historical and institutional contexts, portraying them as warm-blooded personalities and not just the suppliers of ideas. Evans displays astonishing powers of observation that can be withering, but he is usually magnanimous. Small points of detail are worked in with relentless clarity. His reminiscences of editing the *International Socialist Review* (not to be confused with the ISO's magazine today) after 1971 are a treat to read.

Camejo's posthumous *North Star* was written during a fatal illness and is thus painful to criticize. He was working on the next-to-last chapter on September 12, 2008, and died of lymphoma on the 13th. But Camejo leaves on the cutting-room floor far too much of both SWP history and his personal life, surely more lively than reported here. What comes through are Peter's humanity and priceless anecdotes, such as his report of "The Battle of Telegraph Avenue" in Berkeley from June 1968.

It's sad that he has only five words to say about his Boston comrade Larry Trainor ("a printer of Irish descent") and misspells the name as "Trainer." [31] He barely mentions Trotsky, and James P. Cannon is absent from the index. Camejo never refers to the Fair Play for Cuba Committee or the defense of the Black militant Robert F. Williams. I had thought that Camejo's political ideas emerged from a significant cross-fertilization with an Australian leader of the Democratic Socialist Party, and hoped to learn more, but the DSP's historic leading figure Jim Percy is referenced only in a footnote.

Memory, we all know, plays strange tricks, more than ever when performing in public. Camejo's only comment on the political contributions of Belgian USec leader Ernest Mandel is the absurd claim that Mandel supported the disruptive antics of Argentinian Nahuel Moreno (a longtime SWP ally) in Nicaragua. [32] This obscures one of the great ironies in the battle between the USec and the SWP.

The USec majority, led by Mandel, adapted to the ultraleftism of the Cuban Revolution in the years when there was hope of a heresy from Stalinism; then, after being bombarded with unyielding condemnation by the SWP's Joseph Hansen, the USec carried out a self-criticism of past positions in 1976. As soon as Hansen died in 1979, Barnes (and Camejo) openly reversed gears and adapted utterly to the Fidelismo that had been hammered by U.S. imperialism into a grim (and probably doomed) one-party dictatorship. "Correct" programs, it turns out, guarantee nothing when advocated by a monolithic apparatus.

In "Some Notes on Salvadore Dali," George Orwell writes: "An autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life, when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats." [33]

This seems too much to ask of any autobiographer, nor would sensational confessions regarding "The Secret Life of the SWP" be of value. Nevertheless, organizational culture requires a critical scrutiny. Until the dynamics of the kind of process that transformed the SWP are dissected in a convincing manner, efforts to build militant socialist organizations will continue to go nowhere on a political hamster wheel.

It is also unlikely that either Evans nor Camejo will be endorsed by other SWP veteran leaders (or

members) as spokespersons of their own experiences, and some people mentioned in passing will no doubt find fault with what is said about them. Neither of these books presents documentation, in the sense of footnotes providing sources that can be checked. At the same time, both volumes have a signal virtue in comparison to writings by jaded ex-radicals who mock the idealism of their younger selves. Neither Evans nor Camejo write with a sneering condescension about their earlier decades of activism.

How Things Worked

Political commentators like to think of “Trotskyism” as a noun but it functions more like a verb, which is why so much of what one reads in mainstream publications on the subject is nonsensical. Even a specific political organization like the SWP must be defined as the sum total of the thousands of separate trajectories that comprise membership from the 1960s to the early 1980s.

Personally, my empathy was lost when both Evans and Camejo explained their most powerful ties to Trotskyism through references to the assassinated, murdered and martyred. [34] I recruited and helped to educate many individuals from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, but I would have been doubtful of the sanity of any potential enrollee who saw martyrdom as the main attraction. The SWPers I knew found their socialist desire encapsulated in images of working people confidently marching into the future; for example, in Giuseppe Pelizza da Volpedo’s painting “The Fourth Estate” (1901), depicting striking workers moving toward the light. [35]

This question of “how things worked” in the SWP becomes especially vexing in regard to the expulsion of Camejo. Camejo was not known as an oppositionist to Barnes on any important political matter, but definitely represented a layer who wanted to leave the office for the streets and was closer to the looser spirit of the 1960s.

On occasion he made heretical comments, possibly even a short-lived call for an all-women’s political party. Peter’s humor oversimplified but was effective in large audiences: “Want to know what social class you’re in? Simple. Take a six-month vacation in resorts in the Carribean and pay with a check. If the check bounces, you’re a member of the working class.” [36] Yet Camejo’s connection to the more strait-laced Barnes Group put at his disposal an organization to which he could recruit and that afforded occasional muscle to get things done.

North Star is just too murky about the details leading to Camejo’s own exclusion from the SWP. Apparently there was a division among SWP members in regard to a Chicano conference on immigration in 1977, and Barnes, allegedly backed by Camejo’s old friends Sheppard and Horowitz, counterpoised Olga Rodriguez to Camejo to undermine his influence. Then, in 1980, following a period of time living in Nicaragua and working in the New York garment industry, Camejo requested a leave of absence from this same Rodriguez who, with Barnes’ complicity, submitted a false written document announcing Camejo’s resignation.

To get away with expelling Camejo, Barnes had to have exceptional authority so that his version of the facts would be accepted. Everyone knew Camejo and he was always approachable; one would think that many of his friends would at least phone him up and urge his return, and then be shocked to learn his version of events. After all, if Camejo could be ejected from membership in this fashion, anyone might be next. Yet there was no protest inside the SWP around Camejo’s expulsion, no evidence of curiosity about the event among his political collaborators of decades.

How was it possible to remain conveniently ignorant when the fact that Camejo was booted from the SWP was staring one in the face? Perhaps Camejo actively discouraged the needed curiosity when it

might have made a difference. In *North Star* he reports that he regarded Barnes' 1979 proposal for an industrial turn as "ultraleft" and "workerist" but voted for it partly "because I knew that if I were to vote against such a resolution there would be a campaign against me and an attempt to isolate me from the membership." [37]

Did Camejo know the futility of dissent because he himself had participated in such campaigns against others who dissented earlier — going back to 1971? If so, it would have been pointless to raise a stink about his treatment, and he may not have actually wanted to get back in.

Building a Wall

One recalls that in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful World of Oz* (1900), the Emerald City was green only for the reason that everyone in it had to put on tinted glasses. In the SWP, what had been required was not glasses but the building of a wall around Barnes, a barricade of compliant and deluded men and women who would raise no public questions and who would face the ranks of the SWP with uniform assent.

Evans reports the following statement by Barnes supporter Ken Shilman in 1981: "There's a party within the party....The real party is in the inner core, who understand the centrality of the Cuban revolution and the anti-imperialist struggle." [38] This suggests that the inner core, the party within the party, went back at least to the near-mystical switch in the assessment of Cuban Communism in 1979; but its origins are surely much earlier, and its structure and dynamics remain opaque.

It would be educative to have a thorough account that reveals how the wall around Barnes, the "real" party, was built; the creation of the source of trust mediating between the innermost group and the membership. As a new member, one subordinates oneself willingly to participants in the inner circle because one assumes their motives are the same, not imagining that other compulsions are at work in the decision-making process. But then it appears as if there might be an inner circle to the inner circle, each one smaller and more fiercely loyal to Barnes.

It also seems that by pledging fidelity to the "real" party some SWP leaders acquired a sense of entitlement; to go off the National Committee meant losing privileges. It was hard to make adjustment to being a regular member, and a remarkable number of individuals dropped out after demotion.

In reading about religious organizations and businesses, one learns that being an "insider" presents psychological perks that boost self-esteem due to special status. This sometimes affords sexual opportunities due to the "aphrodisiac" of perceived power and the extra openings for pursuit due to travel and fulltime work in the milieu of appreciative people.

If this was so in the SWP, we get none of that in the two memoirs. But perhaps a greater perk was that the SWP "elect" could play the role, in their imaginative lives, of steeled Bolshevik agitators, immune to and scornful of conventional behavior (families, long-term work and union obligations, and strong roots in communities were all discouraged), which offers its own satisfaction. Anyone past adolescence knows that seemingly "selfless" acts can be a mask for selfishness. These are just a few of the aspects of internal political culture that are very difficult to discuss, and probably unpleasant for any former SWP leader to confront. Sunlight, however, is the best disinfectant.

And what about factionalism, seemingly an indelible part of politics? What we may learn from these memoirs is that mature political activists, above all those leading organizations, should try to limit rather than exploit factionalism; the true forté of the Barnes Group was skill at taking advantage of a

factional mentality, not political genius.

Every debater uses the technique of seizing upon quotations, distorting and overemphasizing what was really meant, with the object of bashing the other side to make a political point. Then there is the common use of “horror stories” about individuals; when the first information one receives about another member from a trusted source is that he or she is a “party wrecker,” “cadre killer,” “against the mass movements,” or “against the turn,” the means by which one processes all of that person’s subsequent behavior is tainted. If one can successfully attach a label (such as “petty-bourgeois”) to a person’s name, one might change the feeling of the membership toward him or her forever. (Radicals often joke about comrades who believed for years that “Renegade” was the literal first name of German socialist Karl Kautsky.) [39]

What happened in 1971, 1973, and 1978-83, the years covered by Evans and Camejo, is more specific than the above. The Barnes Group indulged in the conscious cultivation of the worst factional habits from the past of the SWP and the Marxist Left in general, with individuals in all tendencies and factions becoming tainted. Political differences were explained by the claim that an opponent’s political ideas in reality expressed an adaption to petty-bourgeois forces (which included the trade union bureaucracy and ultra-leftists) or even bourgeois pressure. One pre-interpreted an opposition’s political position by putting an unsavory label on it borrowed from Leninist and Trotskyist history — Shachtmanite, Abernite, “economist.”

In the case of Barnes, the simplistic idea that “political line” trumps all became a mechanism for subordination to the leader and his increasingly smaller inner circle. Signs of disagreement were taken as an incitement to splitting the party or at least disrupting urgent tasks. Those anxious to ingratiate themselves with leaders offered off-the-rack refutations of threatening points of view, many of which came directly from the SWP press, pamphlets, or leaders; one was never quite sure if the person defending (or opposing) the “line” with Marxist-Leninist citations had read any primary sources.

Perhaps the most extravagant belief that Barnes appropriated from the SWP (and no doubt Communist Party) past was the notion that wavering was a trait of middle-class intellectuals, while certainty was the stance of he-man proletarians. Somehow, with no connection to the working class but aided by the support of Dobbs, Barnes quickly acquired a mystique of proletarian authority through his absolutism, yet another element of the process requiring further explanation.

This appeal to proletarian authority may have had a special impact on the SWP members, not only because of the magnitude to SWP internal culture of the 1939-40 split between Cannon and the alleged “petty-bourgeois opposition” of Max Shachtman and James Burnham, [40] but also because so many joining the YSA and SWP aspired to cast off middle and even upper-class backgrounds.

Questions for Socialist Activists

Many aspects of the SWP experience raise questions for members of all socialist groups that require disciplined behavior to realize objectives, rely on guiding personalities to lead over the decades, and sometimes use centralized modes. The SWP is not unusual in that its written record combines much ideological certitude, indefensible today, along with plausible hypotheses, analyses and projections.

Faced with such a mixture in the socialist tradition, are Marxist politics going to be along the lines of a religious truth, involving the surrender to self-assured authority as a leap into the arms of faith; or to a scientific truth, supposedly provable to reason, with results confirmed by experiment or calculation? If we are to learn anything at all from our socialist predecessors — of all tendencies and

factions — it is that ceaseless inner conflict, not certainty, is the fate of the revolutionary internationalist who seeks to advance theory and practice in the 21st century.

Some questions are beyond my ability to completely answer at this stage. Was the SWP an organization from which one can take what one wants, leaving the rest? Can anything from the SWP be retrofitted for yet a third chance or must it simply be remaindered (the conclusion of Camejo and Evans)?

There is also an ultimate question that must be periodically revisited. We still live in a culture where socialism is not part of the national dialogue, and many admirable veterans of the 1960s-1970s Far Left have adjusted their horizons to merely revitalizing social democracy, which to be sure would be a vast improvement over the present. Could our 1960s-70s bid for revolutionary internationalism have been merely a benign fantasy?

In answer to this, I can only ask *Against the Current* readers to look around the world, or at least at the economic catastrophe for the working people of the United States and the explosive yearning for the democracy in the Middle East. Some of us can still see Marx's Old Mole hard at work.

In conclusion, one should remember that Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* has a happy ending. It is a play far more about self-delusion than manipulation; redemption comes through the acknowledgment of fallibility and complicity. But it's rough going for Leontes, who fell under a central delusion years earlier that caused him to interpret so many subsequent events incorrectly. Even the Oracle of the Island of Delphos could not convince him that he was wrong. Only with the death of his son and wife does Leontes come to his senses.

One would hope that such dire events are not required before veterans of the SWP and similar organizations come to their own senses and recover elements that can still be a usable past. There is nothing discreditable in such acknowledgement. To join the SWP was to become a person with a mission, to become part of a special group of men and women who, against all odds, wanted to change society for the better; one felt a bit more in control of the universe. But that sense of purposefulness can detach itself from infatuation with a particular organization and individuals (no doubt idealized) to become the consequence of a more thoughtful understanding of history and existential meaning.

Marcel Proust put it just right in *Within a Budding Grove* (1919), Volume II of *Remembrance of Things Past*: "We don't receive wisdom, we must discover it ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us."

Alan Wald

REVIEW: When Skateboards Will Be Free

Said Sayrafiezadeh's *When Skateboards Will Be Free* is a painful memoir about a child whose parents were self-absorbed revolutionaries. His book reveals quirky parents whose separate lives revolved around the Socialist Workers Party. He paints a vivid picture of the party's campaigns from the vantage point of a child dragged to meetings, street sales and demonstrations. Most vivid is his take of the SWP's annual summer schools and conventions at Oberlin College, where the party's

children roamed the grounds and buildings, stuffed themselves at the all-you-can-eat cafeteria, and watched the rallies where members responded to the promissory speeches with sustained clapping, cheering, feet stomping and big collections.

Like all children, Said desired his parents' love and attempted to incorporate their values even when those were fiercely at odds with the world around them. Like many of us from dysfunctional families, Said could not understand the dynamics that drove his parents and ended up having to raise himself.

As someone who was a member of the SWP during much of this period and who has a walk-on part in his memoir, I find the story deeply moving and profoundly true, although written from the point of view of a child who couldn't understand everything he saw and heard, and gets some parts wrong.

Every child wants the family to be happy together, and for those of us whose families split apart for one reason or another, we didn't want that to happen and, as a result, feel extraordinarily alone. Not only did Said's "Pop" leave when he was a baby, but then his sister, and later his brother became part of another household, of which I was a member. Outside of the wonderful summer days of Oberlin and the kids he played with after school, Said remembers his childhood in gray tones: his life was a series of worries. Would he take the right side? Would he say the right thing?

Would he fail the expectations of his parents? Of course most of us do, in one way or another.

Said's memoir also took my breath away because the adults in his life did not protect him when he needed them to do so. He perceived his parents as campaigning for justice and equality yet failing to nurture him. His memoir shouts: the political is personal too!

Some have expressed doubt that he was sexually molested; as if they simply can't believe that party cadre could do such things. I mentioned that to a woman who's been a socialist almost all her life; she told me that as a child another party's leader molested her. In my case it was a nice next-door neighbor.

Said never became an activist, nor even explored radical politics, as he eventually admits to his girl friend. And although his life choices are different from my own, I could identify with his attempts to emerge out of the increasingly sectarian shadow world of the SWP and find his way into adulthood.

Dianne Feeley:

* <http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/2145>.

P.S.

* From Against the Current July/August 2011, ATC 153.

Footnotes

[1] The SWP in the United States should not be confused with the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, far better known today. The latter dates back to a group organized in 1950 around the "state capitalist" theoretician and activist Tony Cliff, taking its current name around 1975.

[2] This was the view of James P. Cannon, as documented in Don't Strangle the Party (New York:

Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1986).

[3] Both books are readily available through Amazon: Leslie Evans, *Outsider's Reverie: A Memoir* (Los Angeles: Boryana Books, 2009), 438 pages, \$18.95 paperback, and Peter Camejo, *North Star: A Memoir* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010), 364 pages, \$18 paperback.

[4] Whether Mark Twain actually coined this phrase so often attributed to him is uncertain.

[5] There are now several websites that include information of this type:
<http://www.marxmail.org/> and http://groups.yahoo.com/group/swp_usa.
back to text

[6] The condo sale story appeared in the 10 July 2007 New York Observer, available on-line at:
<http://www.observer.com/2007/communists-capitalize-village-sale-get-1-87-m-loft>. The story does not provide details about the fate of the money.

[7] The book was reviewed on the Solidarity blog by Dianne Feeley:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/2145>. It is reproduced on ESSF on this page.

[8] "Square Target of the FBI" by Walter and Miriam Schneir, available at:
<http://www.thenation.com/authors/miriam-schneir>.

[9] This was published under the names Leon Trotsky and André Breton in 1938, and can be found on ESSF website (article 22528). The document, stating that a revolutionary society should from the outset support "an anarchist regime of individual liberty" for intellectual and artistic work, is an example of how Trotskyism in the 1930s stood for genuine workers' democracy, despite violations of such democracy in practice in the Civil War era by Lenin and Trotsky.

[10] See the authoritative first volume of Cannon's biography by Bryan Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Paperback edition, 2010).

[11] The 1938 document is available at:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/index.htm>.

[12] Paul Le Blanc's review essay for *Labor Standard* can be found on on ESSF (article 22598):
[Making Sense of Trotskyism in the United States: Two Memoirs](#).

For other perspectives and details that go beyond the focus of "A Winter's Tale," see also: A review by Joe Auciello in *Socialist Action*: <http://www.socialistaction.org/auciello50.htm>; two reviews by Louis Proyect:
<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2010/07/12/north-star-a-tribute-to-peter-camejo/>
<http://www.swans.com/library/art16/lproy59.html>; and a review by Barry Sheppard:
<http://links.org.au/node/1783>.

[13] On the current discussion about Lenin's view of a revolutionary party, see the excellent review essay by Charles Post, "[Party and Class in Revolutionary Crises](#)," in the January-February 2011 issue of *Against the Current*, available on ESSF (article 19696). A frequent commentator on new (and old) debates about the Leninist party is Louis Proyect; see the articles on his homepage: <http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/>. Paul Le Blanc is the author of several books and articles on the subject; see: <http://paulleblanc.laroch.edu/>.

[14] See Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War* (London: Verso, 1986).

[15] The policy was cogently defended by James P. Cannon in *Socialism on Trial* (1942), available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1941/socialism/index.htm>.

[16] J. Meyer [C. L. R. James], "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem," report delivered to the thirteenth convention of the SWP in July 1948, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1948/07/meyer.htm>.

[17] The part played by the SWP in the antiwar movement has yet to be acknowledged by historians. Fortunately, Fred Halstead wrote a crucial work devoted to it, *Out Now: A Participant's Account of the Movement Against the Vietnam War* (1978), and Barry Sheppard reviews the SWP record in *The Party: Volume I* (2005).

[18] Pablo, a pseudonym for the Greek Trotskyist Michals N. Raptis, advocated long-term entryism in Communist and social democratic parties, as well as democratic centralism from above in the Fourth International.

[19] See George Novack, *Understanding History* (New York: Pathfinder Press, Third Edition, 1980).

[20] Personal disclosure: In early 1968 I left SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) to join the Antioch College chapter of the Young Socialist Alliance, and in September 1969 I joined the Oakland/Berkeley branch of the SWP. *New Left Review*, then as now, served as a beacon.

[21] Every political document by an experienced author contains escape clauses, but the main line in this new thinking is clear in the material collected in Jack Barnes et al, *Towards an American Socialist Revolution: A Strategy for the 1970s* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971).

[22] But he was also seeking total control by limiting activities to the one area, campus activism, where he had the most influence. See the following statement by Barnes: "...the party has to be politically homogeneous. It has to be a party with one program, a party that is active and disciplined. The party is politically homogeneous in two ways: first, through its program, which is the revolutionary politics of a party expressing the historical interests of the working class; second, there is the homogeneity that comes from common political experiences. Common experience over a certain period of time, common collective experience in struggle, is part of what makes a combat party homogeneous" (Barnes et al, *Towards an American Socialist Revolution: A Strategy for the 1970s*, 124). This may sound logical for a "combat party," but turned out to be a formula for transforming independent-minded members into troops to be commanded by self-inflated generals.

[23] I came to that conclusion not long after the experience, expressing it in a now obscure paper, unsigned and circulated in photocopy, around 1983, called "Fatalism Versus Critical Consciousness." In later years, two of the P.O. leaders emerged as a talented musician and writer. Barnes' supporters scattered in all directions, one long-time adherent eventually becoming a Tea Party leader. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Beren.

[24] This is especially the case for the P.O. in regard to the ideas of George Breitman on "The Current Radicalization Compared with the Past," some of which appear in Barnes et al, *Towards an American Socialist Revolution*, 83-105. Breitman made a number of erroneous projections, but was sincerely trying to grapple with a novel situation that merited an informed and respectful exchange; instead, he was regarded by the P.O. leadership as providing the rationale for Barnes' adaptation to the late 1960s conjuncture.

[25] Founded in 1977 as a split from the International Socialists, the ISO implemented a student orientation in the 1980s and grew substantially in the 1990s to become the largest Far Left socialist group in the United States, with roughly 1,000 members.

[26] The P.O. documents mostly make for dull reading today. Although its proposals are milder than one might expect in regard to the emphasis on industrial colonization, they are also embarrassing in regard to obliviousness about the growing role of issues such as homophobia and heteronormativity, not to mention technology, environment, nationalism, religion, and so forth, in the coming decades.

[27] None, so far as I know, were FBI and police agents; these universally lined up with the Barnes Group. The most notorious was Ed Heisler, a Barnes lieutenant. Years later the SWP's newspaper *The Militant* would falsely accuse oppositionist Hedda Garza with being an FBI informant.

[28] Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 329.

[29] Evans, *Outsider's Reverie*, 143.

[30] See Paul Le Blanc, ed., *In Defense of American Trotskyism: Rebuilding the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1990), and Sarah Lovell, ed., *In Defense of American Trotskyism: The Struggle Inside the Socialist Workers Party, 1979-1983* (New York: Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1992).

[31] Camejo, *North Star*, 27.

[32] *Ibid.*, 167.

[33] George Orwell, *As I Please* (New York: David R. Godine, 2000), 156.

[34] Evans, *Outsider's Reverie*, 313; Camejo, *North Star*, 115.

[35] The painting is featured in Bernardo Bertolucci's film "1900."

[36] This quip was recalled in an article about various memories of Camejo:
<http://links.org.au/node/639>.

[37] Camejo, *North Star*, 174.

[38] Evans, *Outsider's Reverie*, 282.

[39] Lenin wrote a famous polemic in 1918, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*.

[40] See James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1943).