

Gertrude Ezorsky: From Left Democratic Socialist to Left Democratic Socialist

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There is a famous quip by Georges Clemenceau: "Not to be a socialist at twenty is proof of want of heart; to be one at thirty is proof of want of head."

Now Clemenceau himself was an illustration of the limitations of his own comment: a radical in his youth, he later became a reactionary, anti-labor, war-monger—showing a lack of both heart and head.

Clemenceau's quote, however, reflects a widespread notion that idealism is something just for the young. Now I hasten to add in the presence of so many philosophers that I am not speaking of idealism in the technical philosophical sense, but in the everyday sense of being committed to decent values, caring about other human beings, wanting to see a more just and humane world. It is widely held that these noble values are charming in the young, even appropriate, but that once one grows up, one has to be realistic and dispense with such nonsense; one has to set aside the foolish dreams of youth and get down to the business of business, to making money, to getting ahead. One is reminded of an advertisement trying to recruit people to the Peace Corps back in 1967. It read:

"So you'll get to be the President of U.S. Copper two years later. What's your hurry? You know everything you want to do will still be here to do in a couple of years. The only thing you don't know is what a couple of years in the Peace Corps will do for you. Maybe it'll help you get to be President of U.S. Copper faster...."[1]

But, no: if moral behavior is right at 18, it's right at 80, too. A lifetime of being committed to good values is both rare and commendable.

To be sure, this doesn't mean one should stick stubbornly to old mistakes. Stupidity does not become more impressive through repetition. Of course one should learn as new evidence and experiences become available. Age, with its greater experience, will often confer an advantage. On the other hand, youth, less tied to encrusted routine, and with neurons increasing rather than decreasing, will often be more open to new approaches, new technologies, and new ideas. But basic values—as opposed to factual knowledge—should not be a function of age. We ought to be committed to social justice, freedom, and equality at any age, throughout our lives.

Gertrude Ezorsky has learned many things over her long career. She has changed her views based on new information. She has shifted her position based on new arguments. She has made predictions, necessarily based on incomplete information, some of which turned out to be wrong, even horribly wrong. But the underlying values have been admirably consistent and consistently admirable.

As an 18-year-old at Brooklyn College in the 1930s, Gertrude was a socialist. Her socialism came not from a careful reading of volume 3 of *Capital* or the *Gundrisse*, but from a belief in certain fundamental values: democracy, equality, and fairness. Looking out across Depression-era America, it was clear that the United States—with its Jim Crow, with its privileged 1%, with its mass unemployment and impoverishment—lacked these values.

Now the term socialist means different things to different people. Many of those who called themselves socialists in those days were admirers—and one could say worshippers—of the Soviet Union. But to Gertrude, Stalin's Soviet Union was the very antithesis of socialism. For her, socialism meant the extension of democracy from the political realm to the economic realm, which in turn would allow it to become real in the political realm. That is to say, if democracy means rule by the people, then self-rule ought to apply not just to the election of mayors and legislators and presidents, but to popular control over the key economic institutions of society. How could one democratically determine one's own fate if one could not make crucial decisions regarding investment or the nature of one's work life? Moreover, under so-called democratic capitalism, even apart from racial discrimination, the inequality of economic resources meant that real democracy was lacking in the political sphere as well as in the economy. Even before the Supreme Court's awful *Citizens United* decision, those with wealth had a vastly greater say over the political system than those without. So for Gertrude, democracy has always been an essential, defining characteristic of socialism. This was her view in the 1930s. It is her view today.

Even before Khrushchev's 1956 revelations it was clear that the Soviet Union was no democracy, and thus for her it couldn't be socialist. In more recent years, many other regimes have called themselves socialist and found their admirers on the left—Cuba or China or even Libya—but Gertrude always insisted that if it's not democratic, it can't be socialist. When leaders hold absolute power for life, that's not democracy and that's not socialism. When the people cannot change their leaders or criticize their leaders, that's not democracy and that's not socialism. And when people must conform to sacred texts—whether they come in holy scrolls or little Red Books or middle-sized Green Books—that too is not democracy and not socialism.

But it's not just police states that have usurped the term socialism. Various political parties in the West—some calling themselves socialist, some using "social democratic" or "labor" but all affiliated with the Socialist International—have expressed their ultimate goal as a more humane capitalism. Now God knows (if she exists) that capitalism could use a little humanizing. But a reformed capitalism, however much an improvement it represents over what prevails in many countries, is still capitalism, which means that private individuals (that same 1%) still make the key economic decisions that affect people's lives. The bankers in Berlin and Paris and London played virtually the same role in their countries under Schröder, Mitterand, Blair and Brown as under Merkel, Chirac, Sarkozy, and Cameron. And German, French, and British workers have barely more control over their own destinies under social democratic governments than they do under rightwing governments. For Gertrude, this sort of social democracy was not and is not socialism.

Of course, free market ideologues claim that the capitalist workplace is a model of freedom. If anyone were not happy with their remuneration or their conditions of employment, they could simply go elsewhere. But the power to quit or to exit is not the same as having a democratic voice; we wouldn't call a dictatorship democratic simply because it allowed its citizens to emigrate. In any event, however, quitting is not a real option when one needs a job to support oneself and one's family. One is not acting freely when one stays in a horrible job. As Gertrude argues in her book *Freedom in the Workplace?* no sensible commentator would say that a person is acting freely when she turns her wallet over to an armed robber. Yes, it's true that she could as a logical possibility refuse the robber's demands and accept the bullet between her eyes, but it is clear that there is coercion here, and where there's coercion there's no freedom.[2] The same applies to the workplace

under capitalism. Workers don't freely choose their jobs. They act under the compulsion of starvation or misery. They are not free.

Social democracy fails to live up to socialist values in another crucial respect. Socialism is based on the principle of equality. But capitalism *requires* inequality—not as extreme as in the United States today—but inequality nonetheless. Adam Smith's invisible hand uses inequality to provide incentives; it uses inequality to allocate resources; it uses inequality to reward winners and punish losers. There can be no capitalism without inequality. Thus a social system based on equality requires an end to capitalism and to the capitalist class system.

There are of course other forms of inequality aside from class inequality: there is inequality based on race, caste, gender, and sexuality, among other characteristics. Some socialists see these other dimensions of inequality as part of the "superstructure" of society, not the "base," and therefore problems that will automatically disappear once class inequality is eliminated. Moreover, these socialists argue that to champion the victims of these other forms of inequality necessarily divides the working class, and weakens the class struggle. Gertrude always rejected this view. Early in her political career she was influenced by the Afro-Caribbean socialist C.L.R. James for whom racial discrimination was a powerful independent social phenomenon, not simply a reflection of social class. For Gertrude there were always two powerful reasons why all forms of discrimination needed to be independently addressed. First, there was her commitment to equality and fairness: it was simply wrong for African Americans or women or any group to be treated as second-class citizens. And, second, there was her deep belief that far from weakening the working class struggle, challenging these other forms of discrimination was essential to strengthen the movement for social change. If a union discriminated against African Americans, for example, it was no favor to the class struggle to pretend that racism didn't exist. The bosses would always be able to defeat a strike by one racial group by importing strikebreakers from the other. Only by directly confronting racism and taking steps to address it would a union, or the working class more generally, be able to resist the bosses' divide-and-rule tactics.

And so Gertrude became a champion of—and a leading scholar of—affirmative action, explaining to us all in her writings on the subject the moral imperative of equality on the basis of race and gender. It is now so commonplace in academic circles that women are entitled to equality that one tends to forget that before Gertrude and others threw down the gauntlet it was equally commonplace in academia—even among male leftists—to discriminate against women. Discrimination, of course, has not disappeared; but virtually no one today will publicly admit to supporting it.

In 1986, Gertrude joined the editorial board of the journal *New Politics*. *New Politics* began in its first incarnation in 1961 as an independent socialist publication, affiliated with no party or sect, committed to "third camp socialism"—opposed to both U.S. imperialism *and* Soviet imperialism—and a belief in the importance of building political power from below. Its initial editorial board and endorsers consisted of more than three dozen distinguished leftists, distinguished in part by the fact that they were all male. In this respect, *New Politics* was a product of its times. The journal stopped publication in the 1970s and then re-emerged in its second series in 1986, but this time its nominal commitment to gender equality was matched by the presence on its board and among its sponsors of distinguished women leftists, Gertrude among them. The journal continued to define itself as "third camp"—opposed, for example, to both the U.S. war on Iraq and to Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship—socialist, democratic, opposed to racism and sexism, and in support of affirmative action. I joined the editorial board of *New Politics* a decade after Gertrude. I found the journal to be more influential than its small subscriber base might suggest. It was always a voice for non-sectarian radicalism, always asking the left tough questions. And in our internal deliberations Gertrude has always asked the tough questions and been a strong voice for affirmative action and feminism—and

for more female and minority board members.

Some progressives have taken the view that we should dispense with race- or gender-based affirmative action and just support color-blind, gender-blind, class-based affirmative action. Others have argued that the totality of justice is represented in the fight for race- and gender-based affirmative action. As was to be expected, Gertrude's approach was neither of these: we need both, she insists. Both sorts of programs are important; neither should be ignored. Her approach is best seen in her analysis of a case involving New Jersey firefighters.[3]

The NJ Civil Service Commission had been found to have discriminated against minorities and it signed a consent decree agreeing to increase the proportion of minority firefighters. Some years later budgetary shortfalls in Newark led to the need to lay off some firefighters and the question arose as to which firefighters should lose their jobs: more senior white firefighters or less senior minority firefighters who had been hired as a result of the consent decree. Now one could sidestep this dilemma by saying we need socialism and there's no good solution under capitalism. Period. But socialists and philosophers and socialist philosophers can't so easily avoid addressing an actual issue that actually came up. The U.S. Supreme Court took the view that affirmative action cannot trump seniority and upheld the laying off of the minority firefighters. Gertrude's solution—and the solution of the District Court judge who was overruled—was that layoffs should be done in such a way as to maintain the proportion of minority firefighters, *and* that the white firefighters who thereby lost their seniority rights should be financially compensated by the federal government (just as they would be if their homes had been taken to make way for a highway).

To Gertrude this solution would have served three valuable purposes. First, it would have supported the principles of affirmative action. Second, it would have been fair, not just to the previously excluded minority firefighters, but to the white firefighters as well, who should not have to alone bear a burden that is society's responsibility. And third it would have helped to build support for affirmative action by avoiding pitting one group against another.

Gertrude's commitment to socialist values is expressed in one other area of her work: her articles on Hannah Arendt and Eichmann. Clearly the main thrust of her case against Arendt relates to questions of fact: did Eichmann really not hate Jews, was he just following Hitler's orders, was he a Zionist, was he a mediocrity? Was Jewish cooperation indispensable to the Nazi project, did Jewish leaders collaborate, did Jews more cooperate in the Holocaust than resist it? On all these factual matters, Gertrude has marshaled compelling evidence. But less noted is that Gertrude also offered a political critique of Arendt.

The critique comes from Gertrude's understanding of socialism as something that is not bestowed as a gift from on high. It is the people from below who make social change, and it is they—and only they—who can bring about the fundamental social change that would be socialism. So when Arendt insisted that Eichmann was a normal, average man without anti-Semitic convictions, to Gertrude this was not just empirically questionable, but part of an argument claiming that ordinary people are incapable of making a better world. And when Arendt criticized Jewish community leaders who were placed in an impossible situation for trying to mitigate harm, stating that it would have been better had they done nothing at all, Gertrude pointed not only to Arendt's sloppy facts and considerable lack of empathy, but to Arendt's denying the capacity for political action.

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A logician, a Stalinist theoretician, and Gertrude Ezorsky were trapped in an elevator during the power outage that crippled the tri-state area following the unusual snow storm we experienced a few weeks ago. How are we going to get out, they wondered? The logician said, "*Assume* that we are

rescued and that the power is restored." The Stalinist said, "I'll have all the electric company workers shot!" Gertrude said, "Power to the people!"

And she's been saying that all her life.

## **Notes**

1. Marshall Windmiller, *The Peace Corps and Pax Americana* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1970), p. 57.
2. Gertrude doesn't actually say that people are "coerced," but that they are "forced," a technical philosophical distinction that I neglected to draw in my remarks.
3. *Vulcan Pioneers v. New Jersey Department of Civil Service*, 34 Fair Empl. Prac. Cas. (BNA) 1239 (D.N.J. 1984).