

Helen Keller's Socialism



"The seeds of socialism are being scattered far and wide, and the power does not exist in the world which can prevent their germination."

–Helen Keller

"There is a pertinence and connection between [Helen's politics and] our current historical moment (even one hundred years later). She has a lot of things to say to us. ... She had belief in the power of the young to move us a few steps closer to the kind of world we'd like to live in. So I hope this film speaks to new generations of activists and gives them some nutrition for the good fight."

–John Gianvito, Q & A with the director, *Her Socialist Smile* (2020)

A director would normally balk at the prospect of making a movie about an historical subject on whom there is an extreme dearth of extant audio or visual material. In fact, director John Gianvito did precisely that twenty years ago when he first began exploring the possibility of making a movie on the under-appreciated socialist politics of Helen Keller. Gianvito had originally discovered Keller's radical political history within the writings of the influential "people's historian," Howard Zinn, about whom Gianvito would later make an award-winning documentary (*Profit Motive and the Whispering Mind*, 2007).

Unfortunately for Gianvito, the primary medium by which Keller (who was blind and deaf) communicated her voluminous thoughts

was, of course, that of the written rather than aural or visual word. Additionally, much of Keller's personal archive of photographic and recorded content was destroyed over the years in a series of tragedies (a house fire in 1946 and the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001).

Recently, however, Gianvito decided to revisit the project. The renewed popularity of socialist ideas following the 2008 global crisis of financial capitalism, the rise of the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements, the historic campaigns of Bernie Sanders within the Democratic Party primaries, and the meteoric growth of Democratic Socialists of America—all these signs pointed to a revived relevance of socialism in the United States.

In this light, Gianvito adopted a different conception of the Keller vehicle. The scarcity of primary audio and visual source material was inescapable, Gianvito recognized; but perhaps this was quite metaphorically fitting for a subject who made use of neither the sense of sight nor sound.

The resultant, imaginative *oeuvre* is the documentary *Her Socialist Smile* (2020), which recently received a limited run through the 58th New York Film Festival (held entirely online this year due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic). The 1 hour, 33 minute movie is an interesting bricolage of white text against a black background; an eclectic selection of thematic music; scenes of nature in states of change and at rest; topical clips from newsreel and other secondary historical sources; professional narration and voice acting performed by Carolyn Forché; and the rare gem offering firsthand recordings and photographs of Keller speaking, writing, working, and playing.

All of this makes the documentary appear as an unlikely combination of worlds. With its text-on-screen format overlaid by musical and narrative accompaniment, one experiences the anachronistic universe of silent film; its interspersed shots

of icicles melting in springtime or a slug making a herculean pilgrimage across the face of a boulder strike one as eminently modernist in form.

This latter aspect of the movie may not be quite so eagerly met by those whose primary attraction to the title stems from a desire to learn more about Keller's socialist thought. There are odd stretches of long minutes in which on-screen bees pollinate flowers and flies buzz around an animal carcass. There is also an odd exception to form when the viewer is presented with the lone instance of political analysis, not by an interviewee discussing Keller's politics, the various U.S. social movements of which she was a part, or the complexities of disability political theory in Keller's time and now. Rather, the movie is given over to a four-minute clip of Noam Chomsky speaking at an event in 1989 on the ideological repercussions of the Cold War and the differences between the "opportunistic ... Leninism" of the 1917 Bolshevik "coup" in Russia (an event which Keller, incidentally, viewed as a revolutionary beacon of socialist hope to the world) and the "mainstream Marxist movement" represented by the German Social-Democratic Party and the likes of Anton Pannekoek.

However, leaving aside questions of appropriate analyses of the social nature of Russia over the seventy-plus years between workers' revolution and "the fall of Communism," the central political content of *Her Socialist Smile* is both inspiring and edifying. Keller lived during the tumultuous years spanning 1880 to 1968; she identified as a socialist for sixty of those years, and was heavily involved in all of the major socialist and radical movements and organizations in the United States for roughly fifteen of those years, beginning in 1908 when she joined the Socialist Party.

Throughout this period she participated in protests for women's equality and Black freedom. She organized in solidarity with workers strikes and anti-imperialist initiatives. She toured and gave speeches on behalf of the

Socialist Party of America and the Industrial Workers of the World. She offered her prestige to movements affiliated with the American Communist Party. She supported the struggle against nuclear weapons and the anti-communism of Cold War McCarthyism. She wrote prolifically on the topic of social revolution, workers' power, socialist strategy, the injuries of economic inequality, the violence and opposition to democracy of the capitalist class, the oppression of the disabled and the economically marginalized, and the hope of a society reimagined around the principle that "the welfare of each is bound up with the welfare of all."

Gianvito provides us with a taste of this all—a taste of Keller's political genius. There are certainly elements of the documentary that are wanting. For instance, Gianvito inexplicably leaves out any discussion of Keller's association with the anti-colonial movements of the 1940s and 1950s; the concomitant Non-Aligned Movement, whose leading figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Josip Tito, drew the keen interest of Keller; or the affection with which Keller regarded Henry Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party campaign for U.S. president. Further, Gianvito's documentary does not include any analysis of the politics of disability, which were of course integral to Keller's lifework.

Nonetheless, *Her Socialist Smile* is a welcome contribution to the contemporary proliferation of socialist-educational materials. If the movie does nothing more than whet the audience's appetite for more of Keller's politics, and socialism in general, then it can be considered a great success.