Keynes, the Rabble, and Revolution

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IN 1942 British economist John Maynard Keynes got an advance preview of Lord William Beveridge's report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services.* In it, Beveridge proposed a comprehensive system of social security that ran the gamut from full employment to national health care so as to eliminate "Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness" from the United Kingdom. Keynes, who had become famous for *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which he wrote in the aftermath of World War I, and for his 1936 magnum opus, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, initially read the report with enthusiasm, but his attention soon lapsed. As Geoff Mann writes in *In the Long Run We're All Dead: Keynesianism, Political Economy and Revolution*, Keynes "seems to have had no interest in the institutional structure of politics of the welfare state that now bears his name." (281) One might say that Keynes acted in a very non-Keynesian manner, but as *In the Long Run* tells us, "Keynesianism" has been adulterated so much that the real McCoy is hard to find.

Keynes died in 1946, but the 2007-2008 financial crisis practically summoned him to life. As Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, and other pillars of finance capitalism crashed, lawmakers and pundits began hawking Keynesian medicine in every outlet that would publish them. Why, Mann wonders, do progressives and the left (neither of which he explicitly defines) always embrace the patron saint of automatic stabilizers and deficit spending in disastrous moments? Thankfully, however, *In the Long Run* is not another doorstopper about the recent financial crisis; instead, it asks what Keynes meant and examines the origins of "Keynesian reasoning." It is a frustrating but occasionally rewarding book to read.

Mann advances several arguments throughout *In the Long Run.* Significantly, he claims that Keynes was not the first Keynesian (sort of like saying that Christ was not the first Christian). According to this logic, Hegel—yes, the philosopher who inspired young Marx—was "Keynesian." Mann is excessive with counterfactual reasoning, but this is one of the most solid parts of his thesis. "They [Hegel and Keynes] were both driven by the constant specter of a calamitous past and a present that seemed volatile and about to explode," he explains. (38) The upheaval wrought by the French Revolution absorbed the former long after the events of 1789 transpired; for the latter, the collapse of laissez-faire liberalism and the destruction caused by World War I had a comparable effect. Thus, contrary to received wisdom, Mann contends that Keynes did not set out to save capitalism in the 1930s with the *General Theory,* but to save civilization, that is, its bourgeois variety.

The second major argument Mann makes is that Keynesianism is an "immanent critique of both revolutionary radicalism and the 'classical' liberalism that was emerging at the end of the eighteenth century and held sway in Europe until World War I." (71) Widespread immiseration cast an ugly shadow on the promises of capitalist abundance, but Hegel and Marx recoiled from the "rabble" and the "lumpenproletariat." It is here that Mann offers this provocative statement: "I will suggest that one of the most important reasons that Keynes remains so compelling to so many, wittingly or unwittingly, whether or not they understand themselves as on the Left, is that the specter of this rabble haunts the 'progressive' political imagination." (76)

Who is "the rabble" and how do they "haunt" the "progressive" mind? And what did Keynes have to do with this? Just as nobody in *Monty Python* expected the Spanish Inquisition, most readers would not anticipate 100-plus pages on Hegel and the French Revolution in a book about Keynes. But this is no ordinary academic study (the publisher, Verso Press, specializes in independent radical material). Mann begins this section with Robespierre, one of history's most wretched figures, who struggled in vain to reconcile the revolution's emancipatory promises with the demands made by the "rabble." Enter Hegel. Born in 1770, and dying in 1831, the German philosopher's life coincided with world-historical events that shaped modern conceptions of freedom and liberty, particularly the American and French revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars. Hegel, according to Mann, helped erect the intellectual scaffolding for political economy, that is, the modern science of government, in *Elements of the Philosophy of the Right* and other writings. Says Mann,

> This political economy is postrevolutionary by definition, and, unsurprisingly, constructed more or less consciously as an antirevolutionary science, born of the desire to maintain some stability in the process of change and, in so doing, to rescue modernity in ways that may be "truer" to its concept—concrete freedom. (165)

Those who are familiar with Hegel will enjoy reading these middle chapters (hat tip to my friend R.S. for pointing out that Mann's sparse references to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* might raise eyebrows). However, the mortals who think he is a tough nut to crack should skip to the concluding chapter of this section, "A Theory of Political Economy." Here, Mann argues that Hegel and Keynes both believed that "political economy" ought to separate, in a true oxymoronic sense, the economic from the political. In plain English, he means that the modern science of political economy is about the "organization of *legitimation*" (original emphasis) and not the rationalization of distribution and production. (202)

The remaining chapters include Mann's exegetical readings of Keynes's *The General Theory* and Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, and his concluding thoughts on Keynesianism in the twenty-first century. The best part is a brief discussion of the Polish economist Michael Kalecki, whom Mann considers "a Keynesian economist with some radical political sympathies and thus more willing than most to take Marxist ideas seriously." (292) Kalecki is best known for his 1943 essay "Political Aspects of Full Employment," in which he described how capitalism's failure to maintain full employment created a fertile breeding ground for fascism. Mann cites several of Keynes's other contemporaries throughout *In the Long Run;* unfortunately, Karl Polanyi, author of *The Great Transformation*, which was published in 1944, is not among them. The Hungarian scholar (Polanyi is described as either an historian, an economist, an anthropologist, or some combination thereof) and the British economist certainly shared similar concerns. James Buchanan, the late economist recently brought into the spotlight by Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains*, does garner two mentions in *In the Long Run*.

In the Long Run is like a conversation between a philosopher and an economist that, to the chagrin of interested passersby, is awash with inside jargon. In an age of hyperspecialization, Mann is to be recognized for crossing the disciplinary boundaries of economics, history, and philosophy while engaging contemporary issues. His arguments are bold and sure to prompt challenges from specialists and laypeople alike. In terms of scale, *In the Long Run* is on par with *To the Finland Station*, although Mann does not write with the novelistic grace that made Edmund Wilson's subjects come alive. Of course, each writer has his or her own style. Mann writes as an activist-professor while Wilson sharpened his pen in combat with writers and critics in the halcyon days of the New York intellectuals. On the other hand, perhaps Keynes the technocrat economist, despite the brilliance of his ideas, simply does not stir the imagination, which is Mann's point. "The economic problem is not too difficult to solve. If you leave it to me, I will look after it," Keynes told Britons during the Great Depression. (54) He did not want the masses to rise up; he wanted them to let him manage the economy while they went about their lives.

Keynes first wrote the phrase, "In the long run we are all dead," in 1924, and he invoked it again in 1937 under different circumstances. On the latter occasion he elaborated, "The best we can do is put off disaster, if only in the hope, which is not necessarily a remote one, that something will turn up."

(13-14) Mann concludes *In the Long Run* on a similar note. In an age of Trump we have no choice but to build on hope wherever it blossoms. The verdict is still out on whether that makes us “Keynesian” and whether we should entrust our futures to distant elites.