The Party of “Peace and Justice”

written by Frank E. Warren | February 14, 2016

First, full disclosure: I read most of Jack Ross’s *The Socialist Party of America* in draft. Although it is normally not good policy to then review the book, I felt I could express my respect for what Jack Ross is attempting and share my concerns in a way that could serve a useful purpose.

Jack Ross attempts two things in his history of the American Socialist Party. One is to write a complete history. Aside from David Shannon’s 1955 book, he is, as far as I know, the first historian to attempt this. His scope goes beyond Shannon’s, and, with some exceptions, he is successful in covering the important aspects of that history. I felt that his discussion of World War II socialism was too narrowly (although understandably) concerned with the issue of foreign policy to the exclusion of the party’s heroic defense of the Japanese-American internees and imprisoned conscientious objectors, but overall his coverage is remarkable.

The second thing Ross attempts is to revise how the history of American socialism is remembered. Too often its early stages have been interpreted through the lens of Ira Kipnis’s *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* and his misunderstanding of the left-right divisions of the early Socialist Party. Following the earlier work of James Weinstein (and expanding on it), Ross is able to show that the interpretations following Kipnis were framed by the Communist Party’s view of the Socialist Party, which exaggerated the importance of the Bill Haywood Industrial Workers of the World and its left to the success of the Socialist Party and distorted the views of the more conservative Victor Berger-Morris Hillquit wing. Later Ross takes on the more recent romantic memories of the Popular Front as the epitome of 1930s radicalism. In these efforts to rectify memories of American radicalism, he is successful.

One of Ross’s important themes involves the Socialist Party’s missed opportunities to participate in insurgencies that could have produced Farmer-Labor-style third parties with a socialist orientation. In his discussions of these opportunities, from the 1896 Populist convention through the Huey Long movement, he is most persuasive in his analysis of the 1920 Farmer-Labor insurgency and of efforts by the League for Independent Political Action to build a 1930s third party. He is less persuasive in discussing Huey Long.

Ross correctly rebuts the Popular Front’s fears of fascism, fears that transformed traditional conservatives into fascist threats, but he appears to take seriously the anti-war left’s fear that the New Deal was becoming a fascist state. He censors Roosevelt and the New Deal from every angle. Ross exaggerates the intellectual role (he calls it the “intellectual bodyguard”) of the Communist Party in the New Deal. He appears to attribute the modern American empire solely to Roosevelt’s actions prior to and during World War II. Having written critically of the New Deal in comparison to the Socialist Party in the 1930s, I am well aware of the New Deal’s and Roosevelt’s faults. But Ross’s one-dimensional view of the New Deal results in such baffling statements as his comment on Herbert Hoover and Al Smith: “Both the forgotten Iowa Progressive and the pro-labor ‘new Tammany’ governor were in many ways more reflective of the Socialist legacy in American politics than Franklin Roosevelt.” Hoover, who opposed direct relief and ordered the U.S. Army to march on the Bonus Army, and Smith, who soon forgot any concern for labor and joined the Liberty League, are a greater part of the Socialist political legacy than Roosevelt? I am not arguing that Roosevelt is part of that legacy; certainly Abraham Cahan’s attempts to transform Roosevelt into a Socialist were misplaced. But a sense of proportion in evaluating the New Deal is needed.

Another problem results from Ross's viewing isolationism as central to the Socialist Party's legacy. He writes of Charles Beard, Oswald Garrison Villard, John Flynn, and Lawrence Dennis that "to one degree or another they were all fellow travelers of the Socialist Party." Party leader Norman Thomas cooperated with Beard, Villard, and Flynn in the Keep America Out of War activities, and he and Dennis exchanged letters that shared some similar concerns about the modern state. But in the 1930s, while Thomas was calling for socialism and many liberals were calling for national planning that would go beyond capitalism, Beard called for planning that only addressed the peaks and valleys of capitalism. In 1935, Villard expressed satisfaction with the New Deal although it was not the "whole loaf." And when he turned against the New Deal, he supported Wendell Willkie in 1940. And in the 1930s Dennis was writing his intellectual fascist tracts, and Flynn, as far as I am aware, never said anything about the Socialist Party until his anti-war activities, and he would wind up in the camp of Joseph McCarthy. While the conservative and liberal isolationists of the 1930s viewed Neutrality Legislation as able to prevent war, Thomas saw it as a stopgap measure to help the United States get to socialism. He never viewed himself as an isolationist in the 1930s; unlike the isolationists, he gave critical support to World War II and he organized the Post War World Council, which was not an isolationist organization.

I am also bothered by Ross's analysis of the legacy of Trotsky. In Ross's analysis of Trotsky's American sojourn, he quite correctly points out Trotsky's misunderstanding of and hatred for the American Socialist Party, the party of "Babbitts." Ross believes that this moment of scorn left a legacy that contributed to the "ultimate demise of the Socialist Party and subsequent birth of neoconservatism." It is easy to see the same disdainful attitude toward the American Socialist Party in Trotsky's manipulation of the "French turn" in the 1930s. But then we come nearly half a century later to the figure of Max Shachtman, who, for Ross, carries on the legacy of Trotsky. I have no quarrel with Ross's antipathy to Shachtman's tactics, but when we arrive at his legacy in neoconservatism, there is a problem. Of Shachtman's critique of the George McGovern candidacy, Ross writes, "Attacks on the 'new class' were but an echo of Trotsky's pathological hatred of Morris Hillquit, the 'Babbitt of Babbitts,' . . . the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists." Except they weren't an echo. Trotsky spoke as an avant-gardist in culture and politics while the critique of the "new class" was precisely that it had no institutional roots and was susceptible to the latest fashionable ideas.

Ross's focus on Shachtman attributes to him a Svengali-like influence. No matter that Michael Harrington broke with Shachtman; according to Ross, everything Harrington did subsequently was due to his intellectual roots as a Shachtmanite. The result is a caricature of Harrington—at least the Michael Harrington I knew. Harrington made his share of political mistakes, but to attribute every decision he made to the Shachtman legacy is an overstatement.

I also have questions about the trajectory that Ross describes for the Socialist Party Militant group in the early thirties: a line from the Militant group to New Deal supporters (largely breaking with the Socialist Party over World War II), to helping found the war-time Union for Democratic Action which then became the Americans for Democratic Action, the organizational center of Cold War liberalism. Ross appears to be claiming that there was something central in the Militant group's thinking that led to these developments. He has a particular antipathy to the Militants. Even though the Revolutionary Policy Committee group in the party was more sympathetic to an extra-parliamentary revolution, it is the Militants who are faulted for the 1934 Declaration of Principles. And even though one of his heroes, Morris Hillquit, earlier wrote a more scathing attack on capitalist democracy than the Militants' critique of "bogus democracy," Ross can only attribute their thinking to fellow travelling instead of a response to what they believed was a crumbling capitalist system. The Militants (as well as Thomas for a short period) did look with favor on the Russian economy as distinct from its dictatorship. But this did not mean they took their "cues," from the Communist

Party as Ross claims, since the Communists objected to this distinction. As I argued in my book *An Alternative Vision*, a lot of the short-lived sympathy for the Russian economy among Socialist Party members had to do with what they felt was necessary to attract new members to the party and keep restive young radicals in it. There was nothing particular in the Militant way of thinking in the early thirties that would determine the trajectory to either pro-New Dealers or later Cold War liberals. Their evolution, as well as the evolution of their intra-party Old Guard rivals in the same direction, had more to do with what was happening in the world in the late thirties than it did with what stance they took on the party quarrels of the early thirties.

I have said that Ross is successful in rescuing the history of the Socialist Party from the romanticizing of the Popular Front. However, in the process, he often uses the term too loosely. Ross writes that Theodore Draper "overstated the case that the Popular Front was a 'four-year' interlude in the history of American Communism." But Draper was right: The political Popular Front existed from the summer of 1935 until the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August, 1939. What I call the cultural Popular Front lasted longer. The political Popular Front in the United States involved a shared world and domestic analysis between the Communist Party and a large segment of the liberal community and a shared program of resisting fascism domestically. It did not involve the New Deal as a participant, although both the liberals and the Communist Party supported the New Deal during the period. The political Popular Front existed only so long as the Communist Party was part of the shared coalition. When Michael Harrington later said, in terms of socialists supporting the Democratic Party, that we should have the Popular Front without the Stalinists, he ignored the historic meaning of the Popular Front. It is not a Popular Front without the Communist Party. It is simply socialists working in the Democratic Party.

Thus, when Ross calls the nomination of Roosevelt for a fourth term the "high water mark of the Popular Front," which had only been temporarily interrupted by the Hitler-Stalin Pact, he is wrong. The political Popular Front ended with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The Union for Democratic Action barred Communists. Its members consisted of liberals who were sympathetic to the Soviet Union and others who were hostile, but all ridiculed the Communist Party. Max Lerner called its "free enterprise" line ridiculous, and *The New Republic* (edited by Bruce Bliven, a leader in the Union for Democratic Action) described the Communist Party as "a pathetic little group of negligible people." Sidney Hillman created the CIO-PAC in the aftermath of the 1942 Republican Congressional gains in order to bring liberals and labor together. Communists and non-Communists worked through it. But unlike the Popular Front committees of the late thirties, it was not part of a larger Popular Front strategy. Like the 1936 Labor Non-Partisan League, it was basically designed to get out the vote for Roosevelt. It did not mean even for pro-Russian liberals that the Communist Party was part of an anti-fascist, pro-democracy alliance.

Despite these concerns, Ross's story of the Socialist Party should be seen as a major contribution. At the very end, Ross calls it an "exceptional party" of "peace and justice." In reading his vivid description of the party's opposition to World War I and of Eugene Debs's eloquent response to Woodrow Wilson's suppression of civil liberties, one is reminded of the party at its best. So too when we see Norman Thomas visiting the sharecroppers of Arkansas in order to force the country to face the terror and repression at work there. At such moments, Ross's book reminds us of just which radical past we should remember.