

The Two Deaths of Max Shachtman



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How we admired and respected Max! The “we” was small in number of course, for how many revolutionary socialists were there in the Thirties in this country? Only a handful of Trotskyists and not all of them had that special feeling for Max shared by “my crowd,” some barely teenagers, others in their late teens or twenties and a few oldsters crowding thirty.

We respected James P. Cannon, too. But we knew him as Cannon. Shachtman was Max. We could joke and banter with him. And when Max spoke at a “big meeting” at Irving Plaza or Webster Hall we were always there. It was not merely that we were entertained by his razor-sharp wit, his polemical skills, his sense of irony, his robust humor but primarily because we were clearly in the presence of an exceptional political intelligence. Even back then, in his ability to integrate Marxist theory, political history and specific events, he had few peers in the American socialist movement.

I and a number of my comrades continued to share these special feelings for Max for more than twenty years. It is not that we were political sycophants (though some were) or that we were unaware or indifferent to his personal-political foibles. He was not a candid man nor was he a generous man. Indeed, in politics he was possessed of a sort of vindictiveness belied

by his surface bonhomie. When he felt "crossed," even on a relatively minor issue, he often retaliated with a kind of meanness that could shock his closest supporters. He was a combination of callous bureaucrat and sentimentalist. Despite these personal flaws—perhaps, in part, in some perverse way because of them, since they gave him a more earthbound and human dimension—we remained Shachtmanites in a political and personal sense.

Shachtman, born in Poland nearly 70 years ago and brought to this country as a child, was active in revolutionary politics before he was out of his teens. In his twenties he had already achieved a degree of prominence in the Communist youth movement as an editor, writer and speaker.

The American Communist Party was one of the first sections of the Communist International to be Stalinized. Yet, in 1928, a tiny number of activists and leaders did possess the courage to rebel openly against the Party's long established tradition of bending in whatever direction was favored by Moscow's shifting ideological winds. Max Shachtman was one of them. When James P. Cannon, old-time IWW organizer and a founding member of the Communist movement here, returned from Moscow in 1928, where he had been a delegate to the Communist International's Sixth World Congress, he managed to smuggle out of the "workers fatherland" a truncated version of a manuscript by Leon Trotsky that would later appear, in its proper form, as *The Third International After Lenin*. Even in its abbreviated and somewhat mangled form, Trotsky's critique of the Comintern made an enormous impression on both Shachtman and Cannon. The two of them plus another leading Party person, Martin Abern (and Maurice Spector in Canada), emerged as the leaders of the Trotskyist current. Needless to say, they were branded "counterrevolutionaries" and promptly expelled from the Party by fiat. Shachtman was 25 years old at the time.

Following their expulsion, Shachtman, Cannon, Abern and their few co-thinkers regrouped as the Communist League of America

which soon had its weekly organ, *The Militant*. Five years went by before the CLA had the resources to publish a monthly theoretical journal, *The New International*. For students of socialist theory and history both publications should be required reading.

The Trotskyist movement grew, but slowly. It received a significant infusion late in 1934 when the CLA merged with the American Workers Party led by A. J. Muste to form the Workers Party. The radical group led by Muste was as deeply concerned with American problems as the CLA was absorbed with the "international question." Joining Shachtman as an editor of *The New International*, now the journal of the united party, was James Burnham who had been a leading theoretician of the Muste organization.

Several years later, the Trotskyists dissolved their organization when they were accepted into membership of the leftward moving Socialist Party. Inside the Socialist Party, the Trotskyists had their largest audience yet. They were soon organized as a well-knit faction within the SP—the Appeal Group—making enormous headway, above all in the Party's youth section, the Young Peoples Socialist League. By far, the most effective Trotskyist spokesman, whether in factional debate or public rally, was Shachtman.

Two years after entering the Socialist Party, the Trotskyists left. Actually, they had sought to split, mistakenly, in my opinion. Had the Trotskyists remained in the Socialist Party and conducted themselves in a more flexible and less sectarian manner quite possibly the Socialist Party would have evolved into the revolutionary movement anticipated by the Trotskyists on their entry.

Now outside the Socialist Party, in 1938, the Trotskyists regrouped as the Socialist Workers Party with a membership several times that of two years earlier and with a youth section of approximately one thousand members.

Shachtman and Cannon continued as the two leading figures of the movement. Max was the theoretician, the writer, the one with greater appeal to the young and the intellectuals within the Party and its periphery; Cannon was the organizational man, the proletarian oriented leader and magnificent orator. Of the two, Shachtman was clearly the more thoughtful and independent personality. He would not permit himself to remain rigidly encased in dogma, never to review the validity of old assumptions and conceptions, even those he had vigorously defended. Above all, there was the "Russian Question."

It was the Trotskyist view that Russia was a "degenerated workers state." It was a workers state by virtue of the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the nationalization of the means of production. These were the achievements of the proletarian revolution of October 1917, the "social conquests" of a revolution that were threatened by the reactionary political and economic policies of the ruling Communist Party. It was a view that was often challenged within the Trotskyist movement but never effectively. Never, that is, until Max Shachtman and a number of his associates rebelled at Trotsky's notion that, despite the Stalinist terror that sacrificed the lives of literally millions and the complete extirpation of democratic rights and institutions, socialists must come to "the unconditional defense of the Soviet Union," at the time that Russian invaded

Finland in 1939. Trotsky insisted that all affiliates of the recently organized Fourth International hold fast to the traditional defencist view. Shachtman objected. For him, the invasion of Finland was a gross example of imperialism. Soon everything about Russia as a degenerated workers state was called into question and eventually repudiated by Shachtman.

In the initial debates in the SWP between the Shachtmanites and Cannonites there was simply no contest. Cannon and his associates could not measure up in debate to Shachtman, Burnham and their co-thinkers in the Party. A large minority

of the Party and a majority of the youth section lined up with Shachtman's faction. Despairing of his leading American disciples, Trotsky personally rushed into the breach. It is a tribute to Max Shachtman that he was ready to cross swords with the "Old Man" whom he loved, respected and feared. Trotsky was one of the intellectual giants of this century, truly a renaissance man, and without question the most brilliant Marxist theoretician at the time that the 36 year old Shachtman engaged him in political combat. Shachtman proved to be not only courageous but he even bested Trotsky in the debate.

Inevitably the Socialist Workers Party split. The Shachtmanites, with about 40 per cent of the members of the SWP and virtually its entire youth section, reorganized as the Workers Party; its youth section called the Young Peoples Socialist League. It was during the Forties and Fifties, in the Workers Party, that Shachtman reached the peak of his intellectual powers and made significant contributions to Marxist thought. Above all, in his writings on the nature of the Russian state and Stalinism. The view that Russia was not a workers state, not even a degenerated one, but a society dominated by a new, oppressive counterrevolutionary ruling class, did not originate with Shachtman. But it was Shachtman more than anyone else who, within the framework of Marxist thought, developed and continually refined the theory of a new, ruling "bureaucratic collectivist" class in Russia with such detail, depth and logic that his work had unique and singular importance. During this period—the Forties and early Fifties—Shachtman's—and our—hatred for Stalinism did not move him or the movement he led to compromise their fundamental revolutionary opposition to Western capitalism and imperialism. We were a movement, sectarian in size but not in outlook, dedicated to the Third Camp of socialism, the camp opposed to both capitalist and Stalinist social systems.

The Workers Party managed to hold its own through the Forties.

During the war it gained considerable respect—and members—among militant trade unionists. No small part of these gains was due to the struggle we waged in our press and directly in the unions against the wartime no-strike pledge promoted by the Roosevelt Administration, by conservative trade unionists and, most vociferously, by the Communist Party. Some of the best labor coverage in the nation was offered in the pages of *Labor Action* and *The New International* (the latter a continuation of the publication founded in 1934).

Following the post-war years, however, the Workers Party, later called the Independent Socialist League, went into a more or less steady decline. It could not withstand the combined effects of McCarthyism and the demoralization that threatens any sect unable to break out of its isolation. There was not only a decline in membership but a gradual erosion of the movement's revolutionary ideological perspective.

Max Shachtman, alas, was no exception. In truth, Max died two deaths. A finite physical death on November 4, 1972 and an earlier moral and political death that has no recordable day or even year.

All we know is that in the middle Fifties there were visible signs of a fundamental shift to the right in his thinking. He sought, as he put it, "an opening to the right." By "the right" he meant, at that time, more progressive tendencies in the trade union movement and the American equivalents of European social democracy. Leading the Independent Socialist League into the Socialist Party in 1958 was part of this grand strategy. The "opening to the right" turned out at first to be a growing accommodation to it. But once this rightward shift was under way it knew no limits. In less than a decade, Shachtman and his followers had moved far to the right of American social democracy. Having entered the Democratic Party to "reform" it, they allied themselves with its more reactionary wing and became vituperative opponents of the

reform movement. By the time of his death, Shachtman had become an apologist for American imperialism's filthy war in Vietnam, aligned himself with the ugliest elements in the unions, rationalized the racist practices of the construction unions. His followers supported Henry Jackson in the 1972 Democratic primaries; in the election, he led the tendency in the so-called Socialist Party that gave tacit support to Richard Nixon.

I tremble to use the word, renegade. But what term better describes a man who reneged on his earlier, most fundamental commitment to social justice? To say that he died, in any sense at all, a socialist, is to denude the word of all meaning, to deny the relevance and seriousness of what he taught us about socialism in years past.

Shachtman's political degeneration, his rapid rush toward accommodation with the Establishment coincided with the explosive disaffection of a whole generation of young people. Had he been able to make contact with the young, who were fresh and receptive to new ideas, might he not have been able to guide some into the camp of revolutionary socialism? To move them out of the path that led so many into the pseudo-Stalinist posture that predominates in what remains of the New Left today, be it rapturous approval of the Maoist horrors euphemistically called the Cultural Revolution or the totalitarianism of societies led by a Castro, a Ho or a Kim II Sung? But why should any of these young people have cocked an attentive ear to Shachtman's revelations about Stalinism when they were accompanied by apologies for the American bombing of Vietnam and plaudits for some of the most reactionary elements in the trade unions and the Democratic Party?

How different radical politics might have been today had Shachtman and his followers remained loyal to the revolution and thereby have been able to make contact with and educate the young. It is this thought that mixes bitterness with nostalgia and sorrow at the two deaths of Max Shachtman.

