

Irrelevance and Eventual Demise

The journey of Sam Webb continues. Elected chairman of the Communist Party USA in 2000, Webb has overseen the decline – some would call it "the collapse" – of the CPUSA since he assumed leadership.

Undoubtedly, he took on this role at a difficult time. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the European socialist community in the early 1990s, most of the world Communist movement reeled from the loss. Capitalist triumphalism weighed heavily upon the world movement and Communists faced a gloating re-writing of their history at the hands of Cold War victors. These were difficult times to be a Communist.

During the most severe repressions of the McCarthyite period, Communists faced economic ruin, personal danger, and even incarceration and execution but they retained a sense of belonging to a world movement growing in influence and prestige throughout the world. The 1990s presented a far different and, in a way, more emotionally difficult challenge: the threat of irrelevance. Many walked away from this burden.

Throughout this period, the former national chairman, Gus Hall - aging and limited by diminished faculties- continued to fight against the demoralizing consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. US Communists suffered two powerful blows: the rise of a new political, economic, and social orthodoxy ushered in by a rabid Cold War President, Ronald Reagan, in 1980, and the abrupt end of an earthshaking historic process begun by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

Both blows staggered the US Communist movement (as well as the US left, in general, which – despite ready denials – found its compass from the CPUSA lighthouse throughout the twentieth century. One's stance on the left was defined by one's relation or distance from the CPUSA).

For Hall, holding to the confidence in Marxism-Leninism that capitalism would prove to be incapable of solving the problems it created, the task was to hold the Party together – its press, bookstores, organizational structures, influence, and integrity - until the balance of forces, the prospects for change shifted again in a new direction.

With his earlier "whiff of fascism" assessment of the rise of the Republican right in 1980-81, he had both underestimated the durability and impact of neo-liberalism over both political parties and overestimated the parallels with the rise of fascism between the world wars. Unfortunately, this estimate later became the ideological anchor for the opportunist leadership that emerged after Hall's death.

As the Party functionary favored by Hall, Sam Webb assumed leadership of the CPUSA after his demise. From the beginning, Webb indicated that he sought a renewal of the Communist Party, a worthy goal, but one requiring a deft understanding of the moment and future prospects.

But instead of rallying the Party at a time of fractures in the global capitalist economy, a new level of imperialist belligerence and a massive assault on domestic civil liberties, Webb began to challenge many of the tenets of Marxism-Leninism as outdated and obstacles to Party growth and influence.

At the same time, he shaped Hall's tactical struggle against the ultra-right into a strategic, uncritical relationship to the Democratic Party and the organized labor leadership, an "alliance" that was neither welcomed by either nor of any consequence to their course of action.

Over the last decade, the Party has lost members, given up the print edition of its paper, closed its bookstores and relinquished its archives to an academic research library. Clubs – the Party's basic organizational units – have vanished or been cast adrift with no educational work or active programs outside of electoral work for Democrats.

The Party has taken no initiatives apart from anti-war work which also dropped dramatically after the Obama election. Out of deference to the Obama administration, the Webb leadership has consciously soft-pedaled the struggle against Obama's imperialist wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. One might conclude that from this decline that perhaps Webb's leadership has jettisoned the best of the CPUSA's traditions while keeping the worse.

Despite the objective decline of the Party, there has been little effective challenge to Webb, in part because he has purged from leadership those who have not slavishly follow his line and stacked leading bodies with those who have. One sees the kind of fawning sycophancy that characterized the most rigid periods of the Party's past with members dutifully endorsing the wisdom of the Party leader. At the same time, Webb has struck an iconoclastic pose as a thoughtful liberator from the tradition's barnacles.

Recently, he wrote a long collection of theses (Socialism in the 21st Century: What it Looks Like, What it Says, and What it Does) notable for its confessional tone and ideological pretensions. Webb's account charts his evolution from a true and loyal believer (forty years a Party functionary) to a convert - through a post 1991 epiphany - to a new vision of socialism and its roadmap. It reads eerily like a chapter from the Gorbachev biography.

He cites the collapse of European socialism as the trigger for a re-examination of the classics from which he drew the conclusion: "In doing so, I began to see our theory, methodology, politics, practice, history, and future in new hues and colors."

He goes on: "If I were asked to sum up what conclusions I reached it would be this: our theoretical structure – Marxism-Leninism – was too rigid and formulaic, our analysis too loaded with questionable assumptions, our methodology too undialectical, our structure too centralized, and our politics drifting from political realities."

Putting aside the theoretical questions that Webb tackles after his rebirth, a practical mind might wonder why, after over a decade, Webb's experiment has not produced a larger or more influential Party. Like Gorbachev's glasnost, Webb's "renewal" has only brought chaos and disunity. Like Gorbachev, he will undoubtedly blame his failings on those who hesitated to faithfully and unquestionably follow him down this road.

Webb's ambitious 29 theses challenge much of the foundations of twentieth century Marxism in theory as well as practice. It is far too large of a task, in a brief essay, to address all of the "adjustments" that Webb projects, but there are a few matters that fully showcase the hollowness of the Webb critique and his failure to draw 21st century conclusions from 20th century theory and practice.

It is common for Webb to feature a seemingly relevant quote from a major figure in the Communist tradition to anchor his departures from that tradition. In this case, he cites a passage from Engels' 1895 introduction to Marx's Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850. He is not the first to comb the classics searching for selective justifications for his views. Nor is

he the first to rip quotes from their textual and historical context to do so.

To read the parsed Engels quote one might see some support for Webb's equation of Communist work with electoral work, as well as a denigration of street action and mass insurrection. But this is to totally misrepresent Engels' point in this work and of the moment he wrote it. Unfortunately, Webb has made a habit of citing selective and misleading quotes from Marxists' works, a habit enabled by his long standing avoidance of attribution. One suspects that this habit is willful.

In fact, Engels was writing at a time when the Social Democratic Party (the Marxist, workers party) commanded a quarter of the vote in Germany. Engels warned against the folly of armed insurrection when peaceful political work was proving fruitful. In step with his interest in military matters, he scoffed at the likelihood of defeating a modern army at the barricades: "We are not that stupid. They might just as well demand from their enemy in the next war that he should accept battle in the line formation of old Fritz... with the flint-lock in his hands at that. If conditions have changed in the case of war between nations, this is no less true in the case of the class struggle". But this was by no means a renunciation of the goal of revolution: "The right to revolution is, after all, the only really "historical right", the only right on which all modern states rest without exception..."

Moreover, the caution against military confrontation – armed struggle adventurism- is not founded on Gandhi-like pacifism, but upon the expansion of the revolutionary movement until the moment is ripe: "Accordingly, it [street fighting] will occur more seldom at the beginning of a great revolution than at its later stages, and will have to be undertaken with greater forces". He stresses that it is essential: "To keep this growth going without interruption until it gets beyond the control of the prevailing governmental system of itself, not to fritter away this daily increasing shock force in vanguard skirmishes, but to keep it intact until the decisive day..." And the tactics of that decisive day are not settled in advance or revealed to the class enemy.

Contra Webb's tentative, passive, and uncertain road to socialism, Engels ends his introduction with a telling historical parable. He constructs a brief account of the rise of Christianity in opposition to the ruling class in the Roman Empire. He recounts the long protracted struggle – sometimes violent, sometimes subversive, but always aggressive and uncompromising – that lead to the eventual dominance of Christianity over paganism in the Empire. The lesson is clear: Victory for the working class grows out of the similar sacrifices, determination, and relentless efforts on the part of the working class movement.

Placed back in context, Engels provides little solace to Webb's new road to socialism, a road that puts the partisan advocacy of workers' power and socialism on the back burner. It offers no justification for turning a Communist Party into the sidekick of the bourgeois Democratic Party. In a little over sixty years the German Communist movement inspired by Marx and Engels grew from a tiny secretive, exiled, and politically repressed sect to a mass party polling well over 4 million votes with over a third of the votes cast; at no time did they suborn the goal of socialism and workers' power to the fleeting opportunities or parliamentary maneuvers of the moment. Instead, they weighed all actions in terms of building the party and advancing its goals. But at the same time, they achieved many advances for German workers while expanding the landscape for democracy in Germany. This lesson is lost on Webb.

Another lesson lost on Webb is that when they did compromise their principles, when the German Marxist party succumbed to the allure of nationalism at the outbreak of the World War, they failed the working class at the cost of millions of lives and the collapse of the movement.

It is because of this historical blindness that Webb's ruminations about a new road to socialism floats on speculation and armchair fantasy.

Marxism without the name "Marx" attached to it would remain the single best body of thought for understanding the nature of capitalism and the necessity of moving beyond exploitation, profit, and class. And Leninism without the name "Lenin" attached to it remains the best explanation of the imperialist stage of capitalism and the most respected and influential guide to revolutionary action.

But for historical reasons – homage to the contributions of Marx and Lenin and ready identification – revolutionaries have conjoined the two names throughout the twentieth century as a symbol of working class liberation. Just as Communism haunted Europe, Marxism-Leninism produces fear on the part of the capitalists and calculated confusion induced by their kept media among many others.

But what's in a name? Webb says. We should jettison "Marxism-Leninism" because "it has a negative connotation among ordinary Americans, even in left and progressive circles... it sounds foreign or dogmatic or undemocratic, or all of these together." Of course we could say the same thing about "Communism" or even "liberalism" in today's poisoned environment. We could say that "Darwinism" conjures negative connotations in many sections of the country where creationism reigns supreme. Yet biologists continue to defend both the term and the core theory associated with the name "Darwin."

It is sleight of hand trumping principle that leads Webb to his rejection of the term "Marxism-Leninism"; his real target is the revolutionary core of the Communist tradition. He states that people will be more comfortable without it, as though renaming coffee will make it sweeter. In reality, it is Sam Webb that is uncomfortable with the meaning of "Marxism-Leninism".

It is a "no-brainer", he states, that "A party of socialism in the 21st century takes as its point of departure the issues that masses... are ready to fight for" (thesis 7). This is sheer nonsense. A socialist party – a party of the working class – takes as its point of departure the immediate and long term needs of the masses. It crafts its program around these needs; it fights to bring others into the struggle to secure those needs; and selects its tactics to advance towards meeting those needs. In short, the party of socialism is first and foremost a party of principle, a party working to inspire what the masses are willing to fight for.

Without accepting this vital role, a Communist Party is not "a party of socialism" but merely a body tagging along behind those lacking a socialist vision. Is there any need for a "party of socialism" that aspires for nothing more than "what the masses are [now] ready to fight for"?

Of course tactics are calculated from Webb's "point of departure", but they push forward, expanding and empowering the fight for working class needs. This, too, is lost on Webb.

Underlying this is a profound pessimism, a lack of confidence in our ability to change what masses are willing to demand.

This negativism, this lack of confidence in the masses, leads Webb to place his hopes in bourgeois politics, corporate politicians, and labor leaders shaped by Cold War anti-Communism. He writes: "The [Obama] election victory in 2008 cracked open the door for another 'burst of freedom'." But Webb gets it backwards. The "burst of freedom" – mass dissatisfaction with the two parties, anger over costly or non-existent health care, fear of economic uncertainties, and weariness with war – opened the door for the Obama victory and the hope of real, significant change.

With a majority in both houses and executive power, Democrats choose to fritter away this great opportunity in obeisance

to their corporate masters. By way of explanation, Webb blames both the Republican debacle of the Bush administration and the ineffectiveness of Obama on the ubiquitous "ultra-right". In Webb's narrow, rigid worldview, they account for all our setbacks – not Democratic Party corporatism, not organized labor backwardness, and certainly not Webb's tepid "Marxism."

The fashion of the day among liberals and "Marxists" like Webb is to fault the left for not doing enough to support the Obama administration while, at the same time, not spurring Obama to do what, in his heart, he wants to do ("...there can be little doubt that Obama views himself as on the side of struggling Americans..."). Without Webb's insights into Obama's inner sentiments, Communists might have been better served over the last two years by charting a militant, independent course, organizing the unemployed, supporting rank-and-file movements, and initiating antiwar and anti-imperialist actions.

Webbism is not Marxism-Leninism; nor is it Marxism; nor is it even a pinkish version of socialism. Instead, it is a sure road to the irrelevance and eventual demise of the CPUSA. Let's hope that Communists reject this course.