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John Barzman

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John BARZMAN,

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A paper at Session 12 « Politics : Party and Otherwise »

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THE FRENCH LEFT AND THE
NEW DEAL, 1932-1936

by

John Barzman

Paper to be presented at Session 12
"Politics: Party and Otherwise"
Fifth Annual Conference on the Current State of Marxist Theory
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Session 12: Politics, Party and Otherwise

Abstract: The French Left and the New Deal, 1932-1936
by John Barzman

When the 1930's opened, the three main organizations of the French Left almost universally looked upon the United States as the epitome of capitalism and its evils. By 1936 they had come to view the New Deal as a model to be emulated and the United States as a power to be depended upon in world politics. At the same time French workers were swinging steadily to the left, a shift which culminated in the Popular Front electoral victory and general strike in May and June 1936.

While important movements for social change did develop in the United States in this period, revisionist historians have pointed to a beginning reorientation towards world empire, increased corporate influence in government, and systematic efforts to coopt and control the unions. Although these new directions had significant implications for the future of French capitalism and world politics, they received less and less analytical attention and publicity from the French Left.

The study is based on the daily newspapers of the reformist trade union central (CGT), the Socialist party (SFIO) and the Communist party (PCF). It concludes that the few attempts at serious analysis of the new directions of American capitalism were subordinated to the needs of French domestic politics and strategic alliances as well as preexisting stereotypical views of the United States.

Three aspects of historical inquiry are touched upon. As a study of the formation of working class consciousness it focuses neither on top theoreticians and leaders nor on grass roots networks and immediate class struggle experience, but on an important link between these two levels, the daily press of working class organizations. As a review of a major programmatic debate of the 1930's, it examines various proposals for fighting economic depression and taking sides in the shifting alliances of world powers. Finally as a study of public opinion it deals with the image of one country and people in the eyes of another.

When the 1930's opened, the 3 main organizations of the French Left almost universally looked upon the United States as the epitome of capitalism and its evils. Yet by 1936, the very same organizations had come to view the New Deal as a model to be emulated, and the United States as a power to be depended upon in world politics.

There is of course a controversy among American historians on the nature of the New Deal. But, whether revisionist or orthodox, it should be easy to recognize that the pragmatic and hesitant measures of the Roosevelt administration had little in common with the stated socialist programs of the French Left. The French Left itself often denounced even the most innovative steps of his administration as mere palliatives designed to save capitalism. Clearly then, the policy changes associated with the New Deal alone cannot explain the about face of the French Left between 1932 and 1936.

Nor can we attribute its change of mind to a decline in the radicalism of French workers who made up the largest constituency

of the Left organizations. In fact, election results show the pendulum of public opinion had been swinging steadily to the left since the depression hit France in 1931. This was especially true after 1934, and among workers.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the Left organizations were not lacking in other foreign models. The Soviet Union had been a popular model in the 1920's, and remained so in the 1930's for many who were impressed by the fact that the Soviet economy seemed totally impervious to the world economic crisis. Countries where the Social Democrats had held office also had provided examples of the feasibility of progressive social reforms: Austria and Germany in the 1920's, and the Scandinavian countries in the 1930's. Finally, one could suppose that the massive anarchist revolution of July 1936 in neighboring Catalonia might have rekindled revolutionary and syndicalist sympathies among French workers.

Clearly then, the French Left's changing attitude towards the United States deserves a detailed explanation. Such a study could also shed some light on the processes through which the public opinion of one country acquires a particular image of another country, and on the function of foreign models in political battles. This was the topic of my Master's thesis which I will try to summarize very briefly today. I based my research on the microfilms of the three main daily newspapers of the Left: Le Peuple, published by the Confederation Generale du Travail, or CGT, the main trade union federation which had adopted a rather moderate socialistic posture, Le Populaire published by the Socialist Party or SFIO, and L'Humanité, published by the Communist Party or PCF. What I am presenting is an account of the evolution of the ideas of the leaders of the French Left over a brief period of time. Unfortunately reading the daily press of political parties provides only indirect clues on the actual state of mind of the masses of working people who voted for or sympathized with

these organizations. Finally such a study cannot cover the views of minority organizations such as the anarchists, and Trotskyists who did play a significant ideological role.

My research then led me to conclude that the attitude of the CGT, SFIO, and PCF towards the policies of the American government and towards the United States in general, were not based on a careful analysis of American political, social, and economic reality and a comparison of that reality to the socialist programs which the CGT, SFIO, and PCF subscribed to. My first point will be to present six factors which I think did determine the position and changes of position of these organizations. I will then briefly review the particular evolution of ^a each of the 3 organizations.

In my opinion, the attitude of the French Left towards the United States was likely to be shaped by the following six factors:

-First, the pre-existing images of the United States in French public opinion. That image has been studied extensively.

In the period immediately preceding the 1930's, the United States and things American were usually associated with adjectives such as young, gigantic, naive and warmhearted but violent, crude or unsophisticated, wealthy, technologically advanced and innovative, modernistic or even futuristic but impersonal, and wealthy. Whenever possible, the Left tried to connect its views of the United States with these preconceptions of the French public.

-A second factor shaping the Left's view was the degree of polarization of American political life at any given moment. The more more vocal movements of protest challenged American capitalism, the more critical the French Left would tend to be toward American society and the American government.

-A third factor was the perceived compatibility of France's international interests and Washington's foreign policy. The more conflict marred relations between Paris and Washington, the more critical the Left would be toward all things American. This was especially true of that section of the Left which aspired to a place in the government and foresaw that it would

have to represent France's "vital interests" in world politics.

-A fourth factor was the extent to which French workers were looking for radical solutions. Insofar as the Left organizations had to take the feelings of their base into account, they would then become more critical of the United States.

-a fifth factor was the emphasis which the French Left chose to place on its opposition to the domestic economic policies of the French Center and Right parties. French capitalism remained adamantly committed to financially conservative policies and archaic economic structures. Thus the more dynamic and innovative American ruling class policies were, the more easily the French Left could put to shame the pettiness and traditionalism of the French ruling class by favorable comments on the United States.

-A sixth factor was the extent of the Left's turn away from revolutionary rhetoric towards the advocacy of reform within the capitalist system. Insofar as it needed to demonstrate to workers

the feasibility of reconciling capitalism with democracy and economic advance for the working class, the Left would become less critical of the United States.

These factors did not apply with the same intensity over the five years covered by this study. As the economic, political, and international conjuncture changed, some factors would take more prominence than others. Thus the center of political attention was alternately focused on the crisis of international trade, war debts and reparations, the effects of the economic depression, the threat of domestic/French reaction,

the traditional rivalry with Italian expansionism, and the rise of German militarism.

Moreover, these factors did not affect the three organizations in the same manner. For example, the CGT was always more interested in economic questions, the SFIO became more and more interested in demonstrating its ability to govern France in a responsible manner, "according to the rules of the game" as Leon Blum put it, and the PCF was only interested in preserving French power in the world insofar as France was allied with the Soviet Union.

Let us review then how each of these organizations evolved towards a strong pro-American position.

The CGT

The CGT was the most pro-American of the three organizations. In the 1920's it had given up its earlier ties with the IWW, and consolidated new ties with the AFL. The CGT popularized the reputedly high wages and shorter workweek of American workers, and advocated collaboration between labor and management on the American model as a solution to technological unemployment. When the depression struck American industry, the CGT believed it was a passing malaise. However by 1932, the enduring massive unemployment in the United States and Washington's pressure on France to pay its war debts had forced the CGT into a more critical stance. Thus in 1932, the CGT had resumed some of its pre-war criticisms of the United States as the land of capitalist anarchy.

As the depression began to affect the French economy, the CGT was thrown into bitter opposition to the deflationist and conservative governments of the Center and Center-Right. The CGT advocated new remedies for the depression: abandoning the gold standard, international trade agreements, a shorter work week and public works to employ the jobless. When Roosevelt began applying what seemed to be similar proposals, the CGT immediately felt that the credibility of its own solutions depended on the success of Roosevelt's measures in the United

states. It launched a campaign of exaggerated praise of the New Deal, calling THE former governor of New York a modern miracle worker, and his legislation "the Roosevelt Revolution". One of the CGT's favorite writers, Georges Boris, compared the New Deal with the French Revolution of 1789:

"...the New World is today accomplishing an economic '89. And the acceptance of the labor codes by the American bosses is a sort of Night of August 4. No wonder people on the other side of the Atlantic believe they have entered a new era".

In 1934, the CGT organized a congress entitled Estates General of Labor and adopted the Plan of the CGT, a program of substantial structural reform of the economy. In all major speeches on the CGT Plan, CGT leaders did not fail to point to the NRA as an example of the feasibility and success of their proposals.

This identification with the New Deal continued all the way until 1936. However CGT leaders were forced to tone down their praise after 1934 for a number of reasons. First the beginning in strikes summer 1934 in the United States seemed to indicate that American workers still had cause for complaint. Second, the figures on unemployment

and industrial output indicated little progress toward substantial and permanent recovery. And finally, as the Popular Front prepared to assume the reins of power in France, it chose to shelve the more radical proposals of the Left's program so as not to antagonize the financially conservative leaders of the Center Radical Party. The CGT's Plan and proposed structural reforms such as nationalizations of failing industries were among the first planks to be sacrificed.

The only plank of the CGT Plan which was ultimately implemented by the Popular Front government was the 40-hour week. Although that demand had not been ^{part} of the platform on which the Popular Front ran in the elections, it was raised so forcefully by French workers during the general strike of June 1936 that it had to be conceded by the National Assembly. It is interesting that one of the major sources of inspiration for the workers demand had been press coverage of the New Deal legislation on the 40-hour week.

By 1936 the CGT leadership had shifted its praise of Roosevelt's policy away from his economic legislation to another aspect of his policy. It now saw Roosevelt as a crusader against fascism. The January 7, 1936 issue of Le Peuple featured a front-page drawing portraying Roosevelt as a new Emile Zola, captioned "J'Accuse!", it showed a righteous Roosevelt designating Hitler and Mussolini as warmongers. Thereafter, the desire for a Franco-Anglo-American alliance clearly became the major concern of the CGT and colored all its judgements of the United States.

The evolution of the Socialist Party is all the more striking because it began from a position far more critical of the United States than was the case for the CGT. In 1932, Jean Longuet, a respected leader of the SFIO and a specialist of Anglo-Saxon countries wrote:

"Governor Roosevelt is an American bourgeois politician of the common kind" and further: "Roosevelt is the candidate of Rascob, the great potentate of General Motors, while Ford supports Hoover".

Another top leader of the SFIO, Paul Faure, sarcastically entitled his articles about the United States "From Paradise to Garbage Heap".

As the reforms of the First New Deal ^{took effect,} a great debate took place within the SFIO on the nature of the New Deal. The right wing of the SFIO and those ^{socialists} most closely tied to the CGT were quite favorable to the dirigisme or state ~~managerialism~~ aspects of the New Deal. Another favorable to the New current emphasized the measures which increased the purchasing power of the consumers, rather than state ~~managerialism~~.

Leon Blum took a middle ground. He believed the NRA was actually transforming the economy in a non-capitalist managerial direction, but he warned that the new society which would emerge would be authoritarian. He ^{therefore urged} socialists not ^{to} take responsibility

for this kind of authoritarian state collectivism. He placed the New Deal in a category entitled "intermediate societies", along with Nazism, Fascism, and Stalinism.

A major current on the Left of the party made no such subtle distinctions. For them, the New Deal was merely the well known intervention of the capitalist state on behalf of the capitalist corporations. Paul Faure wrote:

Let us not dream of ^{an} intermediate state that would mete out its favors and even its justice equally to Labor and Capital, a strange conception in which the questionable methods of democracy intermingle with the disturbing methods of fascism without our being able to tell where the first stop and the other begin.

Another leftists, Jean Zyromski wrote:

The principle "there is no socialism without a workers movement" warns us against half-baked efforts to transform the capitalist economy in a socialist direction by means of volleys of decrees and without foundations in the workers movement. ..Socialism must be carried and transmitted by the workers movement.

Throughout 1933, 1934, and even into 1935, those socialists most critical of the New Deal dominated the party. In 1933, the right-wing neo-socialists were expelled. The strike waves of American workers and the successes of American socialists in industrial unions were reported enthusiastically in the socialist press.

However, by 1936, the same factors which operated on the CGT were pushing the SFIO towards a more positive appraisal of the United States. The desire to put together a parliamentary majority with the Moderate Radical Party, the search for

an ally against Germany that could replace the faltering League of Nations and the ^{disappointing} English alliance,

the need to promise material improvements to the workers within the framework of capitalism led to ^{SFIO begins to adopt} new ^{approach}. In May 1936, Leon

Blum became the first socialist

prime minister of France and broadcast a message to the American people over NBC radio: He said:

"The task of the government which is about to be formed will be to carry out the wishes of the majority of the French people.

Are these wishes not closely related to those of the American people? Have the American people not remained passionately attached to the Republic, to democracy, to freedom? Have they not applied the whole power of the democratic state to finding a solution to the crisis? Have they not sought that solution in the direction of increasing the purchasing power of the toiling masses and a more equitable distribution of wealth? Have they not demonstrated by resplendent examples, even though they do not belong to the League of Nations, their will to create international solidarity, to legalize peace, to put an end to the regime of armaments?

The PCF

The evolution of the Communist Party's attitude was even more drastic. In 1932, L'Humanite's articles on the United States were commonly entitled: "In the land of King Dollar", "In the land of Lynch Law", "In the land of the electric chair", or "Cuba under the Iron Heel of Yankee Imperialism". When Roosevelt assumed office in Washington, the PCF denounced him as a fascist and warmonger. In 1933 L'Humanite proclaimed "Roosevelt and his Democratic administration seek a gradual fascization", and "Under the sign of the Blue Eagle, the workers' blood is flowing in Pennsylvania". Throughout 1934, the PCF continued to deny that the New Deal had improved the workers' lot in any way. During this period, the PCF gloried in denouncing the CGT and the SFIO as pro-American and pro-fascist. One series of articles in L'Humanite denounced the CGT and socialist leaders as "the Christopher Colombuses of Social Fascism".

In 1935, a slight change began; the New Deal was no longer seen as a tool of fascization, but as an arena for class struggle. The workers could put some of its clauses to good use if they struggled against the intentions of its authors. Then a more dramatic shift took place as the PCF adopted the Popular Front policy. Now Roosevelt was portrayed as a champion of the

little people fighting Wall Street, the Supreme Court, and the Hearst press.

It is interesting to note how the CP's coverage of the United States became more favorable. Where it used to emphasize the racism of the whole American system, it now focused on racist minorities like the Ku Klux Klan. Where it used to attack all corporations, describe brutal repression of strikes, it now portrayed the progress of the trade union movement. Denunciations of American imperialism gave way to the following distinctions:

"In the United States today, the so-called 'isolationists' are vying with the so-called 'internationalists'. The first represent the industrialists who produce for the home market. The Hitlerophile press of Hearst supports their neutralist point of view. The others represent big capital; they know that because of the complicated machinery of world trade, isolation is impossible. They advocate collaboration with all states interested in peace.

However the PCF did not endorse the counter-cyclical inflationist and state interventionist policies of Roosevelt. The refusal to endorse the New Deal's economic policies can be explained by the PCF's desire to retain its doctrinal purity while conciliating the conservative economic orientation of the French Radicals with whom the PCF was allied. The PCF remained opposed to any version of the new Keynesian social-democratic economics quite late. It only endorsed nationalizations and structural reforms under capitalism tentatively in the mid-1940's, and decisively in the 1960's in the precursors of the Union of the Left. But by this time, advisory planning, nationalizations and counter-cyclical action had become acceptable

to the mainstream of the French ruling class.

This brief review of the CGT, SFIO, and PCF has hopefully indicated some of the factors that shaped their attitudes towards the United States. In general, their comments were critical when popular protests in America were more widespread and when French workers were turning to more radical solutions. But these considerations were outweighed and their comments became ^{more} favorable when they needed to demonstrate that capitalism, economic progress and democracy could coexist, and when they felt America could be a useful ally against Germany.

In both cases they relied on the store of pre-existing images of the United States to bolster their case. However, the image of the United States could not be manipulated entirely without risks. Thus the assertion of the feasibility of a shorter workweek under capitalism led French workers to demand its implementation even though it was not part of the Popular Front program. Similarly, coverage of the American mass picket lines, strikes, and union drives may have inspired French workers to join the CGT in unprecedented numbers and to occupy the factories in the general strike of June 1936.

At any rate, the Left's coverage of the United States was not designed to analyze the ^eral workings of American society and discover what lessons it might hold for French workers. In this respect the CGT, SFIO and PCF did not behave any differently than most political organizations making use of foreign models.