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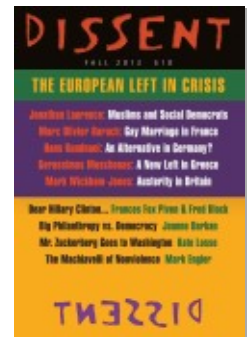
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The New Left Wasn't So New

CHRISTOPHER PHELPS

Now so familiar as to risk seeming clichéd, “We Shall Overcome” was the paramount song of the civil rights movement. “Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome some day”: the song spoke to a generation’s idealism, solidarity, and optimism in the transcendence of injustice.

It is now practically lost to memory that the song enjoyed an equal vitality within the early New Left. *We Shall Overcome* was the official songbook title of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a group more important than the better-known Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in generating sixties New Left radicalism. When Tom Hayden, at age eighteen, traveled south from Michigan in 1961 to observe SNCC’s efforts to register black voters in Mississippi, he returned to write the SDS pamphlet *Revolution in Mississippi*, which, issued in the same year as *The Port Huron Statement*, reproduced all the words to “We Shall Overcome” on its title page. Joan Baez, twenty-two, sang “We Shall Overcome” at the 1963 March on Washington, and Pete Seeger sang “We Shall Overcome” together with SNCC staff in Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964.

So popular was the song that President Lyndon Baines Johnson mouthed the words “We Shall Overcome” in a nationally televised address in 1965 to advocate the Voting Rights Act, a striking instance of that curious alchemy by which the radical becomes mainstream. Yet when SNCC’s Bob Moses, historian Staughton Lynd, and radical pacifist David Dellinger led a march on the White House later in 1965 to signal the transformation of the civil rights movement into a movement against Johnson’s own war in Vietnam, they still sang “We Shall Overcome.”

If “We Shall Overcome” seems the quint-

essential song of the sixties, that is only through the erasure of its origins in a much earlier left. The song first appeared as sheet music in 1947 in *People’s Songs*, a periodical Pete Seeger founded after the demise of the Almanac Singers that he and Woody Guthrie had created to arouse anti-fascist spirits on the eve of the Second World War. One of Seeger’s associates, Zilphia Horton, had set down the words and music as “We Will Overcome” in 1947 after she heard it sung by black women in the Food and Tobacco Workers, a Communist-led union out on strike against the American Tobacco Company. Those women, in turn, had adapted it from the old gospel hymn “I’ll Overcome Someday.”

The song became a staple at rallies for Henry Wallace, whose independent Progressive Party campaign in 1948 against Harry Truman protested the Cold War and racial segregation. There the song sustained wishful thinking, since far from overcoming, the Wallace campaign was the last gasp of a Popular Front left soon to be suppressed by McCarthyism. Around 1955, the year when Seeger was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, the singer, in an inspired move, substituted “Shall” for “Will,” transforming “We Will Overcome” into “We Shall Overcome.” In that iteration the song was taught at the civil rights leadership training at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. There, Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, and Martin Luther King learned the song and transformed it into a movement anthem as the civil rights tempo quickened with the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–56.

What, then, was “We Shall Overcome”? Many things at once: a song of the 1940s, a song of the 1960s; a song of the Popular Front, a song of the New Left; a black spiritual adaptation, a folk rendition; a protest song, a crossover hit; a song for the picket line, a song

for civil rights marches; a song with a history and a song that seemed, by the early sixties, to be entirely of the moment.

"We Shall Overcome" is emblematic of the 1960s, whose movements radiated newness and youth even as they drew strength from deeper and older currents. This nuanced reality, however, has been occluded by the story sixties radicals told themselves.

Young radicals in the 1960s, seeking to demarcate themselves, adopted a narrative of progression from what they called the Old Left to what they called the New Left. Their story went something like this: In the 1930s and '40s, there was an Old Left. Centered on the Communist Party, it included Trotskyists, Socialists, and others. Shaped by the Great Depression, the Old Left was organized in political parties, typically vanguard parties. It saw workers as its constituency, pursued common ownership of production, and espoused economic radicalism first and foremost. Then came 1956, Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's atrocities, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the collapse of the American Communist Party. The Old Left's credibility lay in ruins. A New Left kaleidoscope arose in its place. Movement, not Party, was its focal point, affluence, not hard times, its context. The New Left sought to transcend Cold War categories with a radicalism focused on moral and cultural issues—race and war, later sexuality and gender—all of which the Old Left had compromised on by promising to address them "after the revolution." The New Left, by contrast, sought participatory democracy in the here and now.

This account held undeniable power. Radical youth perceived their cause as new in part because *any* left would be new after the fifties. The interruption imposed by McCarthyism in the history of American radicalism had been severe. In calling themselves the New Left, sixties youth sought to conjure up a new sensibility as well, one that reflected political necessity since the revealed record of Stalinism required American radicals, if they hoped to retain moral credibility, to distinguish themselves from the Soviet Union.

In the process, however, the New Left did

something not often recognized: it created the Old Left. That category functioned to emphasize discontinuity in the history of radicalism at the expense of understanding the ways in which, as with *"We Shall Overcome,"* that history was actually an overlaid one. Because social movements achieve widest success when they forge solidarity across generations, one of the less-appreciated self-imposed limits of the sixties upsurge was its framing bias toward youth.

"Old Left" was a retroactive appellation, popular among sixties youth, that evoked an image that was at best partial. Certainly, nobody at *People's Songs* in 1947 thought of themselves as Old Left. They were young, too—so young, in fact, that Pete Seeger is still with us today. But into the Old Left's maw all of the left's faults and foibles could be tossed. That left was reductionist, mechanistic, dogmatic. It was not radical enough because it was subordinate to the liberalism of the Henry Wallaces and Eleanor Roosevelts. It disguised itself behind terms like "the people" because Seeger and others had failed to be forthright about their Communist Party memberships. In a word, it was *passé*.

For reasons both explicit and tacit, the vision of a New Left proved attractive. Newness was a prominent value in a society forever trying to move commodities off the shelf, evoking positive associations even in the subconscious of those youth alienated from the shallowness of consumerism and conformity. Red-diaper babies sought to



Joan Baez sings "We Shall Overcome" at the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington (Rowland Scherman, U.S. Information Agency, Wikimedia Commons)

succeed where their deflated parents had not, while southern students influenced by existentialist Christianity and northern left-liberals each had their own reasons to be suspicious of the Communist left as well as Cold War anti-Communism.

And there *was* something genuinely new and attractive about the New Left. The widespread embrace during the 1960s of an open-ended radicalism, one as much about democracy as political power, about values as much as victory, did represent a break from the Old Left, as was evident when social democrats such as Michael Harrington and Irving Howe chastised New Left youth whom they saw as naïve, both in an approach to politics that tended toward utopianism and in their willingness to overlook or downplay Communist malevolence. When socialist elders had the locks changed in New York shortly after the Port Huron convention, barring SDSers from their own office, it underscored the apparent gulf between Old and New.

Fifty years on, however, the distinction between Old Left and New Left is of distinctly limited value. Its categories simply dissolve and disintegrate if put to the test—as exemplified by the journey of “We Shall Overcome.”

Consider the following criticism of American politics. Speaking of “the unbelievable degree of apathy and uninterest on the part of the American people,” the passage reads as if it were taken from the *Port Huron Statement*: “Unless the American people are aroused to a higher degree of participation, democracy will die at its roots.” But this was penned by Saul Alinsky in *Reveille for Radicals*, written in 1946. That book drew on what would later be called “Old Left” lexicon in speaking of “People’s Organizations.” His was a new leftism emerging within the Popular Front of the 1940s.

Or consider, from an entirely different sector of the left, the sardonic writer who mocks the “professional revolutionary”: “The deceived masses run away from you and you run after them, yelling ‘Stop, stop, stop, you proletarian masses! You just can’t see that I am

your liberator!’” Such would-be “Marxists,” says the writer, believe “sexuality is a petit-bourgeois invention. It is the economic factors that count.” This is not Abbie Hoffman, but Wilhelm Reich in *Listen, Little Man*, 1948.

Or what of the writer dismayed to find radicalism in America “scattered, demoralized, and numerically insignificant”? Because “the present high school and college generation does not remember the depression,” a revival will require “new foundations”:

Radicalism in America must be recruited from radicals, from strong and independent spirits willing to stand on their own choices....A disciplined, maneuverable army of the left is, in this country, an absurd dream. There is no reason for anybody to join it; those who easily accept orders are in quite different armies already. Communism has failed completely in the United States partly because its adherents have not played a truly radical role.

Surely this was produced after 1956? But no, it’s Henry F. May, “The End of American Radicalism,” in *American Quarterly* in 1950, examining the rubble left after the Henry Wallace campaign.

Other examples abound of an alternative left consciousness sprouting from the cracks of the 1940s. Dwight Macdonald spoke openly of “a new left.” The Congress of Racial Equality pioneered sit-ins and freedom rides. C. Wright Mills developed a criticism of bureaucracy that owed much to the opposition to “bureaucratic collectivism,” East and West, in Max Shachtman’s circle of Trotskyist-derived heretical socialists. Staughton Lynd, the New Left’s most noted intellectual by the mid-1960s and himself a product of the early postwar years, once called these 1940s trends “the first New Left.”

Or was it the *actual* New Left? After all, in the 1940s such ideas were truly new. By the 1960s they were long in gestation.

Not only was the New Left old, but the Old Left was new. The Old Left generation was not simply erased by McCarthyism and Stalinism. The Communist Party was discredited, to be sure, but this freed a generation of radicals to

chart more independent courses after 1956, making the 1960s left far more intergenerational than is often acknowledged. It's not just that Pete Seeger records spun on many a New Left turntable. Everywhere one looks in the 1960s, one finds an adult left in its middle years, interacting with youth, contributing to sixties radicalism, and collapsing distinctions between Old Left and New.

In Los Angeles in 1951, for example, four Old Leftists, still young in heart but rejected by the Communist Party, formed the first sustained American homophile organization: the Mattachine Society. By the early 1960s, the homophile movement had made a significant contribution to the sexual revolution so often credited to the New Left at the expense of the supposedly economic Old Left.

Those in Britain who hatched the very term New Left—including historian E.P. Thompson, whose *Making of the English Working Class* of 1963 pioneered a “new” labor history engaged with class and culture—were Communists who quit in 1956. It was in their *New Left Review* that C. Wright Mills published his “Letter to the New Left,” saying that students, rather than a “labor metaphysic,” were the agents of radical renewal.

Many putatively New Left strategies were spawned by Old Left seers. Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Stanley Levison, and other Old Left veterans advised Martin Luther King and younger radicals in the southern freedom movement. Social democrats at the United Auto Workers helped arrange the Port Huron camp for SDS in 1962 and donated money to make its Economic and Research Action Programs possible. Hal Draper, a 1930s Trotskyist, gave sage counsel to Mario Savio and other student radicals during the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley in 1964.

What periodicals did New Leftists read? *Monthly Review*, the *National Guardian*, and I.F. Stone's *Weekly*, all launched in the 1940s and 1950s by remnants of the Popular Front left. Or *New Politics*, edited by left socialist veterans of the 1940s and 1950s. Perhaps even the *Dissent* of Irving Howe, onetime Shachtmanite, who clashed with the New Left but published Tom Hayden, Staughton Lynd, and other new radicals.

Malcolm X Speaks, published in 1965, was

edited by George Breitman, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, which was practically the only organization to give the black militant a platform in the last year of his life. It was issued by Grove Press, where Harry Braverman, another Trotskyist veteran, was editor. Would Malcolm's views have been as

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influential had not older revolutionaries—Jewish, in this case—arranged for their dissemination?

National demonstrations against the Vietnam War, although initiated by SDS in 1965, were mostly organized by a coalition of older radicals in the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, headed by radical pacifist A. J. Muste, whose activism dated back to the First World War. Prominent intellectual opponents of the Vietnam War included Norman Mailer, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Sidney Lens, all of whom came of age on the 1940s left.

Even Black Power fits the template. Stokely Carmichael, who popularized that slogan more than anyone else, was a Trinidadian immigrant whose initiation into radical politics came through his close friendship at the Bronx High School of Science with Eugene Dennis, son and namesake of the American Communist Party leader. Black Power radicals James and Grace Lee Boggs came out of Detroit's labor left of the 1930s and '40s, while Harold Cruse, who did so much to promote black nationalism and stigmatize the Old Left, had once been a Communist. In England, the Trinidadian C.L.R. James, a Trotskyist since the 1930s, counseled black militant pan-Africanists of the 1960s.

Or take the women's movement. It was indubitably new in scale, innovation, and independence in the 1960s, and the left in the 1930s and '40s did subsume gender within class when discussing “the Woman Question,”

but New Left men responded with even less comprehension when women began to assert the need for sexual equality in the 1960s. Old Left women, moreover, helped spawn the new feminism in ways direct and indirect. Although McCarthyism buried the memory of initiatives such as the Congress of American Women, which in the late 1940s pushed for child care, equal pay, and other demands that would later be called feminist, CAW veterans in the 1960s such as Eleanor Flexner and Gerda Lerner pioneered the writing of women's history while Women Strike for Peace, formed by Old Left women, contributed to a rebirth of women's political action.

When the young white civil rights organizers Casey Hayden and Mary King wrote two memos in SNCC and SDS that were the first serious documents on women in the New Left, objecting to sexism within those organizations, they read older women who were making themselves anew: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan masked her background in the left-led electrical workers' union, UE, with a fable of middle-class suburban life, and her Popular Front ethos was too tame for women's liberationists, but her criticism of rigid Cold War gender norms sewed seeds of radical women's consciousness.

Many recent histories of American Communism fail to register how gravely Stalinism distorted the left of the 1930s and '40s, a factor just as important as McCarthyism in necessitating the disguises adopted by the Seegers and Friedans of the time. Democratic radicals and revolutionary socialists observed those failings at the time, the fundamental differences among rival camps of radicalism being another reason why "Old Left" holds little value as an all-encompassing term. There is, however, ample evidence that even the Communist left was hardly contemptible on every issue, as historians have charted the many positive contributions of 1930s and '40s radicals on labor, fascism, empire, and especially race—which the Old Left cannot now be said to have waited until "after the revolution" to address.

Ideas bracketed as "Old Left," moreover, remained live options throughout the 1960s, which hardly saw all of the older folkways dispelled. One is found in the later New Left's attempt, in a decade of war and revolution, to "name the system," as SDSer Paul Potter put it. That process led many to see "capitalism" and "imperialism" not as stale, musty words but as accurate descriptors at that very moment, when the American business class was reclaiming the word "capitalism" and investing it with positive connotations.

Once capitalism and imperialism came into sight again for the left, as Carl Oglesby observed, it was certain that young radicals would work their way back to Marx and Lenin. In this there was plenty of insight, not only tragedy, for the turn to theory and history signaled recognition of social systems and structures that would not be displaced by moral symbolic action alone. It is also the case, however, that a good part of the New Left in the end succumbed to the Old Left's worst errors and deficiencies: scriptural fundamentalism, bureaucratic centralisms, and simplistic versions of internationalism revolving around a single sun, whether China, Cuba, Algeria, or, worse, Albania or North Korea.

Here again the sunny contrast between New Left innocence and Old Left bankruptcy is shown to be overdrawn. Newness and youth did not guarantee purity. Some errors of the New Left, such as its Weatherman-style adventurism, were catastrophic beyond any faults committed by the once-disdained Old Left. At the same time, the later New Left fostered new liberations in culture, sexuality, and gender beyond those the early New Left had wrested, and much of it came to understand, however belatedly, that working-class majorities are the crux of lasting transformations. Even as the New Left suffered fissures and crises by the 1970s, it showed greater humility toward its older counterparts on the left, recasting them as long-distance runners who faced similar predicaments and challenges.

When talking to millennials, anyone above the age of forty will hit a moment when a vast

sinkhole seems to open up, with all points of cultural reference dropping through. Perhaps you find yourself at a seminar table of twenty-somethings rambling on about punk's halcyon days and refer to Patti Smith's variation of "Gloria," only to realize that no one knows what you are talking about. They don't know Patti Smith. They don't even know "Gloria."

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They certainly don't know its origins in Van Morrison's early garage band Them. Finally, you blurt something out about "Brown-Eyed Girl," a recognition flickers, and Van Morrison allows the regaining of a precarious toehold in cultural history.

Should this surprise us? The 1960s are now two decades farther from our time than they were from the 1930s, and the New Left is old in a new way. The times, they have a-passed. The next generation inevitably has its own points of reference. They do take interest in the flurry of fiftieth-anniversary commemorations now erupting, since the epochal shift of the sixties continues to exert an attraction, but we are witnessing the final draining of the wash of '68, and any future American left will have different contours and identities.

For decades unprecedented in the history of American radicalism, a single generation's myths and legends have held sway over others. Boomer dominance prevailed even as, from South African divestment in the 1980s to AIDS resistance to the global justice Battle of Seattle in 1999, outbursts tossed up newly radicalized youth. No subsequent cohort emerged with numbers or ideas sufficient to surpass the New Left generation, whose glory days, cautionary tales, and balance of left leadership power held sway over the radical, or once-radical, imagination. The consequences for memory were illustrated this

past year when the fiftieth anniversary of the *Port Huron Statement* was marked at a spurt of events across the country while the hundredth anniversary of the 1912 campaign of Socialist Eugene Victor Debs passed entirely unobserved.

Debs was part of what might be called, to adapt Lynd's phrase, the first Old Left, winning a higher percentage of the presidential vote in 1912 than any American socialist before or since. Many of the assumptions of American socialism in its heyday now seem naïve, if not retrograde. It was largely, though not exclusively, male-dominated at a time before women were guaranteed the ballot; it was prone to talk of class unity alone at a time when black Americans were being lynched and stripped of voting rights. Electoral socialism does not resonate so well with a contemporary left steeped more in anarchism than Marxism. In these respects the New Left may still present a fresher model. Other aspects of the Debsian vision, though, surely speak as well, if not better, to our era: its imagining of a fighting left, one opposed to war and exploitation, inclusive of revolutionary visions and social reform alike; its multigenerational combinations; its commitment to effective organization; its bent toward economic democracy against immense inequality. In some respects its old credo is neglected (or is the word impermissible?) not for its faults and archaisms but because it remains so radical and relevant.

That lineage may revive in trace form in future lefts, now that Occupy, however fleeting, has put class and inequality again on a new generation's radar. It informed even the New Left, however, which for all its affluent context cannot be understood without its roots in a Debsian vision of equality. SDS in its earliest years focused on poverty in the Economic and Research Action Programs, and various New Left voices—James Weinstein at *Studies on the Left* and *Socialist Revolution*, Paul Buhle's *Radical America*—sought a socialism rooted in American realities, imbued with the cumulative insights of subsequent liberatory radicalisms. Such is perhaps the vein of radical thought and action now being reclaimed by those seeking alternatives to the bubble-and-bust capitalism of our new Gilded

Age.

If the New Left was old, and the Old Left was new, if neither were faultless and neither irredeemable, if both remain attractive but neither can be transferred tout court to our present, if their evaluation and appraisal was never made easier by seeking to box them up tightly in neat chronologically divided compartments, then perhaps this leaves us with a story of a common left, a long left, a left that stretches far back in time all the way up to our present, one subject to tragic flaws but animated, at its best, by the enduring ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality. Contingents of radicals to come will generate their own fables of newness while staking claims to this heritage that arcs back to 1776

and the abolitionists. Always the left has had continuities and ruptures, innovations and borrowings, solidarities and betrayals, legacies to draw upon, errors to discard. If future lefts synthesize the best of the old, experiment anew, draw upon the verve of youth and the perspective of age, and succeed in speaking to their present, casting the left's ideals in a parlance and fashion suited to their moment, then perhaps someday we might well overcome.

Christopher Phelps teaches American studies at the University of Nottingham. He is at work on a history of American radicalism, co-authored with Howard Brick, to be published by Cambridge University Press.

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