

# *Archive: Democracy as the Guiding Star*

## Max Shachtman

**Editor's Note:** Max Shachtman (1904-72) [1] was one of the great platform orators. Irving Kristol recalled he could 'argue at a high pitch of moral and intellectual and rhetorical intensity for two, three, even four hours.' [2] Irving Howe, in his brilliant memoir, *Margin of Hope*, drew a sketch of Shachtman at the podium. '[He] gave startling displays of virtuosity, some of it theatre but some real thought. He excelled in destroying an opponents use of citations from holy texts by restoring them to their proper context; he was devilish in his mockery of pretension and false learning. His shrill voice would rise to flourishes of passion, then suddenly bank to an utterly Jewish taste for the ridiculous. Even his opponents could not always suppress their delight in his skills.' [3]

In this rather serious and subdued speech, given in Chicago in 1958, Shachtman shared a platform with Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party's Presidential candidate from 1928 through 1948. Thomas's Socialist Party and Shachtman's Independent Socialist League were in the process of merging and both men were setting out their vision of the kind of socialist movement they wanted to build together. In this part of his speech Shachtman sets out his 'fundamental principle': 'the highest attainment of democracy lies in Socialism, and by the same token, that the road to Socialism lies in the highest fulfilment of democracy.'

\*

I want to start out from the fact, which I must establish with great regret, that socialism in the United States has reached its lowest point. The largest and most highly developed capitalist country in the world, with the largest and most powerful labour movement in all history, has a great many people who remain inspired by the ideal of a socialist society, but it has no socialist movement comparable to those we know in Europe, and even in Asia.

The reasons for this paradox are numerous and complex, and it is not the purpose of our meeting tonight to trace and analyse them all. We are devoting ourselves this evening, as I understand it, to considering the need for reconstructing a

## SHACHTMAN | Archive: Democracy as the Guiding Star

genuine socialist movement in the United States, and examining at least a few of the problems that confront us. At the very lowest point in more than 60 years of modern socialist history in this country, we are, I am deeply convinced, standing before encouraging possibilities for a new beginning.

The overwhelmingly preoccupying danger of a war threatens the world with extinction and tears at the heart and nerves of the people. And our statesmen do not even offer a program that seriously promises an enduring peace. The richest country in the world, with the most prodigious capacity for satisfying the material wants of the people in the amplest degree, with the most marvellous machinery yet devised for distributing the products of labour, has broken out anew into an economic depression. This after a quarter of a century of the so-called 'welfare state,' with its famous 'built-in guarantees' against economic disturbances and convulsions. While over five millions of workers are already unemployed, millions of others live in fear of losing their jobs in turn, and all of us are held in the ever-tightening noose of inflation.

The basic problem of rational production and distribution is no nearer solution under this richest and most powerful of all capitalisms than the no less vital problem of peace.

And when, in addition, ten percent of our population, which is distinguished from the rest only by the darker colour of its skin, is still denied the democratic and civil rights that are granted to the others, then the basic problem of democracy, of equal rights for all, likewise remains unsolved.

Socialism renews its challenge to the old order, and feels called upon and encouraged to present the socialist alternative to the people of this country. We declare our determination to bring all efforts to bear upon rebuilding a movement that can with pride and with strength take its position in the ranks of the world-wide socialist movement.

These efforts, which we aim to renew now, will not bear full fruit, unless we are clear in our own minds about the kind of socialist movement we mean to build in the light of the discouraging and distressing experiences of the past few decades. Socialism has, as you know, been interpreted and defined and misinterpreted and redefined in many ways. We have been 'joshed' a little bit, from time to time, with the charge that there are '57 varieties' of socialism. I don't want here to quarrel with

the critics who amuse themselves so easily with their charge. What I will do instead is to outline briefly what I mean by a socialist movement, the kind of socialist movement I want to see flourish in this country, the kind of socialism for which I seek to enlist your support. I will not call it the authentic socialism, I will not say it is the only socialism. I will however say it is the kind of socialism and socialist movement that I want to see built up.

### Democracy in Foreign Affairs

Anyone is at liberty to organise whatever kind of socialist movement he wants to organise. I want to organise and build a *democratic* socialist movement. And not one which stutters and stammers when it says democratic socialism, but proclaims that loudly, proudly and firmly and with the deepest inner conviction. And what do I mean by a 'democratic' socialist movement? If no details are given, it can easily become a very deceptive shibboleth.

I mean a movement that stands first of all, without compromise, for democracy in foreign affairs – in the relations between nations and people – because it understands that the state of these relations bears most heavily upon the danger of a universally devastating war. We understand that a truly lasting peace is, in the end, not to be obtained without the principle of democracy as the guiding star in international relations.

Democracy in foreign affairs means first and foremost the application and practice of the principle of the right of self-determination of all nations and peoples, and the defence of this right as the first principle of international relations. I demand the right of national independence for the people of Hungary, and for all the satellites of the Kremlin who are deprived of this right by the force of the Russian secret police and its armoured tanks. I demand the right of national independence and self-determination for all countries and peoples, still held at this late date in colonial subjugation. One of the most shameful and brutal denials of this right is being perpetrated by the French Republic against the people of Algeria. I am glad of this opportunity to state that I have nothing in common with the policy followed in Algeria by the present leadership of the French Socialist party. It has nothing in common with Socialism or liberating doctrines of the rights of man, first proclaimed in France six generations ago. I am gripped by the icy hand of dismay to see that the name of socialism is associated with the depredations of France in Algeria. I welcome with joy and solidarity those French socialists who

## SHACHTMAN | Archive: Democracy as the Guiding Star

have disassociated themselves with indignation from the present official policy of their party and who have thereby preserved the honour and the good name of socialism. And as an American socialist in particular, I demand the democratic right of self-determination for the people of Okinawa, who are presently denied this right by the United States, whose spokesmen justify the occupation of foreign territory against the clear will of a population, at the same time that they express high moral horror at the occupation of foreign territory by armed Russian forces. And I am happy to be in solidarity on this score with our comrades of the powerful resurgent Japanese socialist movement who represent one of the firmest pillars of progress and democracy in Asia.

### **Democracy at Home**

By a democratic socialist movement, I mean one that supports with vigilant steadfastness every step forward for democratic rights and civil liberties at home, no matter how small, for everybody. Not nearly or even mainly, for those who agree with us, but precisely for those who disagree, including those who defend ideas that we might detest. I mean a movement that does not tolerate, but that combats witch-hunting in all of its obnoxious forms; that resists the newly-established American principles that you have to have a license from the administration to engage freely in political activity in this country. That the right to travel is a special privilege that the government can grant, or deny, at will. That people can be arrested and imprisoned, not for some crime committed, not for some overt act, but only for the crime of thinking, or advocating the support of its thoughts, ideas, and program. That means first and foremost, the Communists – the most numerous victims of this political monstrosity – who have been imprisoned under the infamous Smith Act, or have been otherwise harassed and persecuted for their views alone.

Democracy at home means an unceasing fight to remove from this land the blot of Jim Crow and all its forms – that putrid heritage of the slave markets of a century ago, and the sturdy establishment of the principle and the practice that the Negro in the United States has exactly the same rights, and in every field – not more, but certainly not less, than the whites.

### **Democracy and the Labour Movement**

I mean by a democratic socialist movement, one that restores the voice and standards of socialist idealism to its rightful place in the trade unions of this country. I would like to rally to the socialist movement all those trade unionists who are sickened,

as we are, by the wide prevalence of so-called business unionism which subverts the unions from their grand purpose and converts them to the role of herds that are traded off on the market, like sheep, by people who are altogether alien to the labour movement, and who look upon it as a business over which they have absolutist control. No movement is closer to our hearts in this country than the trade unionists. We cherish none so highly and so dearly. We know of no country, and this from long experience, where democracy could live for a moment if the trade unions were not permitted to live and to flourish. The democratic rights which alone permit the existence and growth of trade unionism must be maintained and protected jealously and zealously. We want to see democracy flower in the trade union movement as a model for the rest of the country. We want to see a movement free from arbitrariness and bureaucratic practices. The democratic socialists stand side by side with every rank and file trade unionist in the defence of democratic rights – the right to speak, to criticise, to decide. It is not enough to be filled with a sense of shame at the spectacle of racketeering in the unions and at the spectacle of the suppression of membership rights. What is required is a socialist movement which will encourage the unions to rid themselves of these evils – lest government intervention opens up anti-union activity conducted under the guise of ‘cleansing the unions.’ We are intensely concerned with this problem. There cannot be a powerful socialist movement without a powerful labour movement, or a healthy socialist movement without a healthy labour movement. And we are – heart and soul – with everybody and everything which assures the health and wellbeing of democracy, and correspondingly the strength of the labour movement.

### **Democracy as the road to socialism, socialism as the fulfilment of democracy**

By a democratic socialist movement, I mean one that has no doubts about what is – I am now more than ever in my life convinced – the key question of our time: democracy as the road to socialism. The position taken on this question is our acid test. Let us face the bitter and dismaying facts. Socialism has come to be identified in the American mind, and especially in the mind of many American workers, with totalitarian oppression and the denial of democracy to the people. In the United States – with its rich and vibrant democratic tradition – this fact has brought about a profound discreditment of socialism. And this identification of socialism with totalitarianism has also brought about a terrible moral and political devouring of its supporters. Altogether responsible for this condition is the rule of Communist totalitarianism in Russia and its defence – in the name of socialism! – by supporters and followers of the Communist movement.

Socialism once meant abundance in equality and brotherhood. Not simply abundance, but abundance in equality and brotherhood – the fulfilment of democracy. Socialism once meant the lifting of the individual to the glowing planes of human dignity, in which the tyranny of man over man becomes only a memory of its primitive days in the class-ruled societies of his historical past. Socialism has come to mean a regime of despotism over man, an imposition against his will. The dominion of terror, of slave labour, of concentration camps, of frame ups and assassinations. Of a paranoid tyranny whose greatest boasts are not in the realms of the growth of human rights and freedoms, but in the production of engines of atomic destruction, more devastating than those of backward capitalism. It has come to mean regimes where no one but the autocrats, and not even all of them, is accorded even the most elementary rights of speech, of press, of assembly, of organisation, of representative government, of voting by choice.

### Democracy in the socialist movement

I want a socialist movement which is honestly capable, and not with tongue-in-cheek, of denying that this gruesome caricature has *anything* in common with socialism as an ideal, with socialism as a road, or with socialism as an organised political movement. I want a movement that divorces itself *completely* and *unambiguously* from all forms of totalitarian and minority rule and most particularly from that form of it which speaks the name of socialism, and thereby stains it. A movement that restores the identity of socialism and democracy. A movement which proclaims in word, and fortifies by deed, the fundamental principle that once held sway without question in the socialist movement – that the highest attainment of democracy lies in socialism, and by the same token, that the road to socialism lies in the highest fulfilment of democracy.

We shun all attempts to impose socialism or that seeks its achievement without the working class, without the people and against their will. Socialism is the conscious and enlightened will of the people, or it is not, it cannot be, and it will never be socialism. We stand more stoutly than ever by the idea expressed in our old and honoured international anthem. We want ‘no condescending saviours.’ The people, the working class, are not some handy instrument to be manipulated by the socialist movement – some inert mass over whom the socialist conquerors’ march to power. The people must be the bone and flesh, the heart, and the thinking directing genius of the movement for socialist liberty. What we want to teach is that if they do not emancipate themselves, nobody else can, and nobody else will

## Democratiya 6 | Autumn 2006

emancipate them. All our fates – and that is why it cannot but be a democratic fate – lie in the people themselves: in their capacity for self rule, for leading societies forward, for determining their own destiny, for ridding themselves, by their freely thought-out and freely decided efforts, from all those social fetters that hamper their fullest spiritual and physical development as human beings. We will never win socialism, or even build a serious socialist movement as apologists for a world in which democratic rights for all but a handful of benevolent dictators are sneered at, despised and brutally denied. We will win only as consistent champions of democracy. And only as such shall we deserve to win. On this fundamental point, the socialist movement dare not, cannot and must not tolerate equivocations.

In every other respect, I want to see a socialist movement that is broad, inclusive, democratic and free in its own ranks, and doggedly bent upon maintaining its unity. We have gone through a long, exhausting and self-defeating period – splitting and re-splitting the socialist movement – of establishing, demolishing and re-establishing all sorts of socialist sects. I do not want to build another sect. I do not want to see a socialist movement thwarted and shrivelled by the curse of sectarian refinements and re-refinements of dogma which are sterile and dry as the desert sands. I do not want to build a socialist movement that is constantly under the twin threat of bureaucratic expulsions and irresponsible splitting. Tens of thousands have been sickened to political death in this country by the monolithism and super-centralisation of the so-called socialist movement. I do not want to see such a movement again. I want to have no part of it for myself.

Let the socialist movement develop freely and normally on the bases of the problems that face it *today*, not the problems that faced it in reality, or in its imagination, fifty or a hundred years ago. Let it develop the new ideas and policies to meet the requirements of new situations and new problems in the fullest intellectual freedom. Let it develop in the fullest freedom from demands for conformity on every question. Let it develop in freedom from threats of renewed splits and schisms – producing more tiny ineffectual self-starved sects which dry out the physical and intellectual well-springs of hundreds of devoted socialists, year in and year out. Let us have a broad, democratic and united socialist movement. And let us not have too pretentious a socialist movement!

We must begin again, not from the very beginning, but almost from the very beginning. We must be prepared to teach what we hold to be true. But we must also be prepared to learn, and above all, to cooperate to the maximum and with full

loyalty, with all labour, radical and liberal elements who do not share all our views. They are for that reason not damned to perdition. There is no other road to build a socialist movement today, if there ever was another.

**Realignment: turning our backs on our sectarian past**

My last thought is precisely on this. If we are to build a serious movement in this country that means turning our backs upon our sectarian past. As one who has devoted some years to the socialist movement, and who has seen the sacrifices made, I am the last man to say 'everything that has taken place in the past, throw it out!' I want to discard that which is obsolete, that which an old dogma may have taught, *but which life itself has refuted*. I want to discard that which was sectarian and isolating, and that now stands in the way of a broad movement.

We must find for the socialist movement of this country what I call 'an opening to the right' – an opening to those masses of people in the United States who stand in their ideas and outlooks (even in their aspirations), to the right of us, but without whose support – tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow – we cannot even dream of a socialist movement. (...)

And I want to call upon all socialist-minded trade unionists, of whom there are literally thousands in the United States, to join or to rejoin the socialist movement so that in addition to all our other activities, we can work together in presenting and putting through a fraternal and friendly challenge to the progressive wing, the labour wing, the liberal wing, in the United States.

It is not only trade unionists I should like to be able to summon into the ranks of the socialist movement, for our new attempt to rebuild it. I want to welcome the professional peoples, the educators – intellectuals who are honest and who cherish their honesty and integrity. And most particularly – for this is where my heart really lies – I want to welcome students and other young people without whom a socialist movement has no future.

We are working, comrades and friends, to realise an old and noble ideal of mankind. Human equality, freedom, brotherhood, the true freedom from want and from fear that we are convinced socialism will assure. A struggle against social inequity, against exploitation and oppression wherever they manifest themselves, against the terrors and miseries of the old world today – that's the most rewarding



struggle of all, and the greatest justification for human living. We seek people who cherish emancipating ideas and the ideal of emancipation, and who are prepared for the joys of sharing these ideals with others. That is what the socialist movement offers. We were never deceived by the spurious armaments prosperity of the past few years, and we have less reason to be deceived by it today. We have no faith in their capacity to establish the peace for which all of us yearn. Ahead of us, under the old social order, lies the grimmest of all threats – the war not to end war, but to end civilisation. Against capitalism, against the false socialism which calls itself Communism – against the world in which to die – we uphold the banner of the socialism which heralds a new world – a world in which to live.

---

Max Shachtman (1904-72) was expelled from the Communist Party in 1928 for Trotskyism. He split from Trotsky in 1939 and founded the Workers Party-Independent Socialist League (1940-58). From 1958, Shachtman was a leading figure in the American Socialist Party and played a role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. He was the author of *The Bureaucratic Revolution: The Rise of the Stalinist States* (1962). Declaring George McGovern's foreign policy a 'monstrosity,' Shachtman leaned towards 'Scoop' Jackson in the 1972 Democratic Party presidential primaries.

### References

Howe, Irving 1982, *A Margin of Hope. An Intellectual Autobiography*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York.

Kristol, Irving 1995, *Neo-Conservatism. The Autobiography of an Idea*, Free Press, New York.

### Notes

[1] The entire Thomas-Shachtman debate is available on audiocassette. Send a \$5 US (for each copy) check or money order made payable to "Chicago DSA", to Chicago DSA, 1608 N. Milwaukee, Room 403, Chicago, IL 60647. Listen to the debate online at <http://www.chicagodsa.org/audarch2.html>. The Editor would like to thank Bob Roman and Chicago DSA for granting permission to reproduce the speech, and Barry Whalley and Eve Garrard for help with the transcription.

[2] Kristol 1995, p. 469, 479.

[3] Howe 1982, p. 54.