

Until We Fall:

Long Distance Life on the Left

Introduction

As I proceeded to write my story, I arrived at a book length text and was only halfway through my life. I did not anticipate needing two books to do it, but I have lived through times of massive historical transformation and participated in many transformational movements. There was much to say about how I processed the world through all this turmoil.

In *Navigating the Zeitgeist*, I wrote of growing up as a little Catholic cold-warrior in the USA in the 1950s, of entering the convent after I graduated from high school, of emerging from it into the vibrant turbulence of the 1960s new left. In the 1970s, I moved from America to Europe, from new left to old left, and became involved in various social movements and left parties. Within Europe, I travelled often from west to east, becoming quite caught up in the dynamics of socialist experiments in what turned out to be the last decades of their existence.

I have taken up the story here in the late 1980s, when our hopes were raised by glasnost and perestroika only to be swept away in the bitter and brutal counter-revolutions that followed. I saw much of it close-up and sought to see that history from below, from the point of view of the vanquished in a world where the triumphalist narrative of the victors held sway. The first two chapters of this book have centred on that experience of feeling the world turn upside down, but it is a thread running through the whole book. Many of the events I have written about here, such as the dramatic elections of 1989 and 1990, have long been known and written into history, but I have striven to bring a “you are there” dimension to these pages. These events may seem long ago already, but the fallout from them continues in ways insufficiently understood, even for those who lived through them as well as those who did not. Many of those born later and know little history are nevertheless buffeted by it. The Ukraine war is part of this fallout.

As well as this focus on Eastern Europe, I travelled to many places where I interacted as meaningfully as circumstances allowed. In South Africa and Greece, I did so with particular intensity and built networks allowing me access to many perspectives and participation in crucial events. Indeed, I interrupted the writing of this book to write a whole book on Greece entitled *The Syriza Wave*. In this book, there is a whole chapter on South Africa.

Through it all, there is the unfolding reality of Ireland, which has been my base, indeed my home, during these years. I also gather the threads of my analysis of what has become of universities in the decades I have participated in them, eventually as a professor, with two chapters devoted particularly to that, but it is also a theme in other chapters. My final chapter, the hardest to end,

because my story is still unfolding, tells of my “retirement”, in which I have been far from retiring. Indeed, it has turned out to be a period of vigorous activity and productivity.

The central storyline of the whole drama has my political activism on the left and the turbulent transformations of our times as they bore down upon us. During every decade of my life, history has surged forward in so many mighty waves that constantly challenged my comprehension and commitment. It has rushed onward with speed and scale unimaginable to our ancestors, making me feel as if I have lived epochs in decades.

It has brought some victories but many defeats for the cause to which I devoted my life. In my early years on the left, I was buoyed up by a rising tide. When that tide receded, I was more truly tested. Many fell by the wayside, but those who persisted made it possible for this great, complex (and sometimes crazy) movement to continue, even in the hardest times, even when we could not prevail. We stood against such formidable forces. We had truth and justice on our side, yet we lost so many battles to those aligned with deceit and oppression.

The capitalist system is decadent yet still dominant. Gramsci’s prescient characterization of his own times is even truer of ours. The old is dying and the new cannot be born. In the interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. It is truly a time of monsters. The morbid symptoms and monsters multiply, yet we fail to enact the transition from capitalism to socialism that the world so desperately needs. It is hard for us not to despair at times, but that would leave the terrain uncontested, and we cannot do that. Besides, there is no other way to live that is worth living.

My story has converged with the stories of others, so I have aspired to capture something of the truth of their lives too, especially those who have gone from the world now and have not left their own accounts of these times. So much of human experience evaporates with so little trace unless it is written. I hope I have done justice to the history through which I have lived and to those who have lived through these times with me.

I continued what I did in my previous book in naming my chapters with the titles of songs resonating with their themes. I have taken the title of the book from a line in the great anthem of the left “The Red Flag” written by Jim Connell in 1889 and sung by so many here and abroad for more than a century.

With heads uncovered swear we all
To bare it onward 'til we fall.
Come dungeons dark or gallows grim
This song shall be our parting hymn.

I have chosen a red flag image for the cover too. I was always inspired by Korzhev’s great painting of 1960 “Picking Up the Banner”, which captures the same incitement to us as the song. We may not have to face dungeons or gallows and we may not be shot in the streets, but we need to take up the struggle of those who did and confront the challenges of our own times in the same spirit. The meetings, marches, occupations, lectures, articles, books, songs and visual arts all contribute to a cause. The best of my generation of the left saw our efforts in continuity with those of the past and I run my final stretch of the road in the hope that future generations will do so too.

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