

# DISSENT

## Eighty Years Since Bread and Wine: Ignazio Silone's Christian Socialism

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Ignazio Silone in Capri, 1970 (Wikimedia Commons)

In the summer of 1957, American intellectual Irving Howe, co-founder of Dissent, traveled from New York to Rome to visit his favorite political novelist, Ignazio Silone. “We were having the usual difficulty in starting a conversation,” Howe remembered, “though we knew we shared many ideas and some experiences.” In an effort to get at the heart of their felt kinship, Silone prompted Howe to start at the beginning. “When,” he asked, “did you first become a Socialist?” At the age of fourteen, Howe replied. Silone began to laugh appreciatively. “You too—It was the same with you?” The ice was broken. Though Silone, born at the turn of the century in a rural region

of Catholic Italy, and Howe, a secular Jew raised in the 1920s Bronx, had grown up worlds apart, they had a common bond. As Howe summed it up in his autobiography, “some thread of shared desire had linked our youth.”

In the 1950s, Howe and Silone also shared a desire to reclaim the moral core of socialism in the wake of Communist corruption. Howe had developed his commitment to left politics growing up in a Jewish neighborhood in the East Bronx and then at City College, as a follower of the Trotskyist Max Schachtman. Yet the Italian novelist who wrote about Christian peasants in the mountains of Abruzzo spoke, in some fundamental way, to his condition. “No more . . . than Silone could avoid the subjects that had chosen him, could I avoid his work once it had chosen me,” Howe recalled in his memoirs. “[H]is questions were also mine.” It was Silone’s second novel *Bread and Wine*, first published in 1936, that stood out as the most inspiring of his works. Howe called it Silone’s “masterpiece.” Where Silone’s first novel, *Fontamara*, published in 1933, was “still buoyed by Marxist belief,” *Bread and Wine* suggested to Howe something new: a post-Marxist, moral form of socialism that could blossom in the space between bureaucracy and anarchy.

*Bread and Wine* is the story of a revolutionary, Pietro Spina, who disguises himself as a priest and lives among peasants to avoid arrest. While in hiding, interacting with villagers and witnessing their yearning for community and spiritual sustenance, Spina realizes that socialism and Christian values have a common source. Silone, the co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, was himself in exile from the radical politics of his past, living in Switzerland, where the book was first published, and trying to recover from a severe case of disillusionment and despair. His novels, Silone explained, emerged from an “absolute necessity to testify,” not only to the oppression of the fascists, or to the moral hypocrisy of the Communists, but to the conditions and experiences of the peasants in his native Abruzzi region of Italy. The novels stood as testimony, but also as exercises in what Irving Howe called

“moral therapy.”

Chastened by the failure of Soviet-style Marxism to liberate the masses, Silone still found in socialism the grounds for redemption. Socialism, he deduced, presupposes democracy; democracy depends upon community; and community grows from the simplest human actions—caring for the sick, breaking bread, sharing wine. These gestures of love and compassion, Silone contended, also formed the fabric of Christianity—not supernatural, institutional, or doctrinal Christianity, but a kind of sacred experience inherent in the practice of social solidarity.

“What remains then is a Christianity without myths, reduced to its moral essence,” Silone wrote. “In the Christian sense of fraternity and an instinctive devotion to the poor, there also survives, as I have said, the loyalty to socialism. . . . I use it in the most traditional sense: an economy in the service of a man, not of the State or of any policy of power.” Expressing his hope that socialism would endure the traumas of the 1920s and ‘30s, Silone concluded, “I do not think that this kind of Socialism is in any way peculiar to me.”

Silone was correct. Four thousand miles across the Atlantic, many American radicals were also searching for an alternative to Communist doctrine. Foremost among them were those New York intellectuals, like Howe, Lewis Coser, and Dwight MacDonald, who had become sickened by amoral state and party power. MacDonald, in his review of Silone’s *The School of Dictators*, wrote: “its importance, like that of the earlier *Bread and Wine*, is that it applies a set of values—humane, honest, and intellectually sophisticated—to the political phenomena of today.” Silone’s works also had an impact on Dorothy Day, A.J. Muste, and New Left figures such as Staughton Lynd and Tom Hayden, all of whom commended the Italian novelist for his insights into the fundamental elements of community-based socialism.

It may come as no surprise that religious radicals such as Day and Muste embraced Silone and his work. But Silone’s explicitly Christian material also appealed to secular socialists—radicals seeking to infuse left politics with spiritual substance

and a deeper sense of social justice. Their focus upon the moral, even religious, features of Silone's political writings indicates that Bread and Wine moved them not in spite of but because of its primitive Christian themes. For Howe, Silone demonstrated a "wistful search for the lost conditions of simple life where one may find the moral resources which politics can no longer yield." In other words, Silone broke socialism down to its fundamental roots in human experience and revealed a naked moral impulse, a spiritual source so primal that it captured universal meaning for, what Howe called, "a generation beaten and baffled, clinging with its fingertips to the edge of an ideal."

In his memoirs, Staughton Lynd recalled: "My growing feeling that the revolution had to be, somehow, both Marxist and ethical, was articulated in a book" in which "a Communist revolutionary disguises himself as a priest, and in doing so is forced to consider how these two parts of his experience—the Marxist and the Christian—fit together. I too felt the need for such a synthesis." In the 1940s, Lynd found in Silone a muse for immediate and direct action, not destructive but constructive—an everyday practice of fellowship and compassion in one's community.

It was this appeal to moral values and a shared community that united such disparate figures as Howe and Lynd—often ideological opponents in debates about the Vietnam War and other critical issues of the day—in their admiration for Silone. As Lynd insisted, "some common ground, some underlying vision needs to be articulated which genuinely unites" socialists and challenges them to transcend differences. By returning to the moral core of socialism, Silone revealed that common ground. He argued that in order to move forward and confront the dilemmas of postwar politics, one must first go back and reaffirm basic values as the source of revolutionary practice. In the process of creating a new ethic of solidarity, these secular socialists discovered that it was possible to minister to both material and spiritual human needs; it was possible to rebuild socialism on moral grounds; and it was possible, as Albert

Camus had wondered, to become a saint without believing in God.

Silone, for his part, had grown up believing in God. Born Secondino Tranquili into a small landowning family in 1900, the man who later became known as Ignazio Silone grew up in the mountainous southern region of Italy, the Abruzzo, surrounded by poor Catholic peasants. “The conditions of human existence have always been particularly difficult there,” Silone described. “Pain has always been accepted there as first among the laws of nature, and the Cross welcomed and honored because of it.” By the age of fifteen, Silone too shared in that pain; having already lost his father and several siblings at a young age, he was one of the few in his family to survive a catastrophic 1915 earthquake that claimed the lives of about fifty-thousand of Silone’s fellow Abruzzi, including his mother.

As Silone remembered, the natural catastrophe was more than matched by the individual and state corruption he observed during and after the quake. The district’s reconstruction program, administered by state authorities, “was carried out to the accompaniment of innumerable intrigues, frauds, thefts, swindles, embezzlements, and dishonesty of every kind.” Most of the villagers regarded this state swindling as an inevitable matter of course, an “irremediable creation of the devil,” which the good Christian needed to accept as natural law. Silone, however, felt the first serious stirrings of moral indignation that would propel him into socialist politics.

Realizing that the conservative church was unwilling to practice its professed principles by opposing poverty, corruption, the Great War, or the rise of fascism, young Silone searched for an alternative institution into which to channel his indignation. He found the workers’ movement, which he described as a profound discovery, “a safety exit” from the “unbearable solitude” of moral powerlessness. Silone quickly climbed the ranks of the Communist Youth International. By age twenty, he was directing the publication of the weekly newspaper. A year later, in 1921, he participated, along with Antonio Gramsci, in

the founding of the PCI or Italian Communist Party.

Although Silone welcomed the camaraderie, the action, and even the danger of radical politics, he found the “spiritual adaptation” or “conversion” to party organization “harsh and painful.” Such a conversion, he quickly realized, required a reevaluation of values set against the absolute standard of party ideology. For the sake of solidarity, Silone repressed his misgivings, but later confessed, “it was not easy to reconcile a spirit in moral mutiny against an unacceptable long-established social reality with the ‘scientific’ demands of a minutely codified political doctrine.” Disillusionment eventually gained upon Silone’s loyalty to the Soviet-led party. He was disgusted by the leadership’s “utter incapacity to be fair in discussing opinions that conflicted with their own.” His 1931 break with the Communists precipitated a serious mental break-down. “[T]he day I left the Communist Party was a very sad one for me,” he recalled, “it was like a day of deep mourning, the mourning for my lost youth.”

But Silone’s commitment to the basic premises of socialism remained unperturbed. “My faith in Socialism . . . has remained more alive in me than ever,” he wrote in 1949. “In its essence, it has gone back to what it was when I first revolted against the old social order . . . an extension of the ethical impulse . . . to the whole domain of human activity, a need for effective brotherhood, an affirmation of the superiority of the human person over all the economic and social mechanisms which oppress him . . . an intuition of man’s dignity.” Scientific theories would come and go, Silone affirmed, but these values were permanent. Collectively, they provided the fabric of socialism in the forms of fellowship, community, and solidarity. “I do not conceive Socialist policy as tied to any particular theory, but to a faith,” he wrote. “On a group of theories one can found a school; but on a group of values one can found a culture, a civilization, a new way of living together.”

That “new way of living,” as distilled in *Bread and Wine*, resonated with many U.S. radicals. According to her diary, Dorothy Day was reading *Bread and Wine* on June 15, 1937,

about a year after opening her first hospitality house on Mott Street. Immediately, she felt a connection to this Italian-Catholic novelist, whose adoption and vision of a more spiritual socialism so closely resembled her own. In the Catholic Worker communities, she was practicing the values of primitive socialism and Christianity on a daily basis, in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. New York City was a long way from rural Italy, but the Bowery poor who frequented the Catholic Worker houses were mostly “ragged, dirty, jobless” men who “led hard and dangerous lives,” much like their peasant counterparts abroad. For Day, the power of communion was to turn these destitute men from strangers into brothers.

Dwight MacDonald, in a two-part essay for the *New Yorker*, recognized Catholic Worker communities as part of a kind of democratic-socialist movement that brought metaphysical ideals such as brotherly love into the everyday. “She has revived the linking of the serious and the trivial that saints and prophets once did so effectively but that long ago went out of fashion,” he wrote approvingly. “The union of the everyday and the ultimate is the essence of the Catholic Worker movement.” Howe agreed, writing in a similar vein in his introduction to *Bread and Wine* that Silone’s primitive Christianity offered a “worldly means to transcendent ends,” a path to radical change that could dissolve boundaries of class and creed and guide both individual and collective political action. Catholic Workers merged means and ends into a continuous stream of practical action, a method that, MacDonald believed, gave substance to their radicalism and offered the American left a much-needed example of moral accountability.

The embrace of simple community fellowship found in the Catholic Worker movement and in Silone’s fiction reflected another enduring ideal as well: democracy. Meals and rooms on Mott Street were held in common, and supplicants were free to come and go as they pleased. They voted with their feet, so to speak, and found inclusion in the community, regardless of denominational or doctrinal affiliations. Staff volunteers at

Catholic Worker, such as Day, and for a brief time, Michael Harrington, promoted democratic socialism through example, not just argument. They were practicing a form of decentralized, direct democracy, a “new way of life” like the one Silone wrote about and that radicals far beyond the walls of the hospitality house, such as Tom Hayden, sought to emulate. Towards the end of a 1962 essay about his experiences in the civil rights movement in Mississippi, Hayden quoted directly from Bread and Wine to argue that the grounds of human dignity were inherent in deed, not doctrine, and expressed as a synthesis of democratic means and democratic ends.

If the Catholic Worker’s hospitality houses were a fitting venue for Silone’s ideals, so too were the pages of Dissent, which Howe and co-founder Lewis Coser began publishing in 1954 in an effort to salvage the dignity and the moral, democratic core of the socialist project. “We all agreed that if socialism had a future as either politics or idea, there would first have to be serious and prolonged reconsideration of its premises . . . of the ideas and values that had propelled us into the sects in the first place.” In the winter of 1955, Dissent published Silone’s powerful essay “The Choice of Comrades,” which encouraged refugee radicals to rely on their conscience, not merely class analysis, as a guide for solidarity. “To judge men,” Silone argued, “it is no longer enough to see if they have calloused hands: one must look into their eyes.” In other words, “spiritual communion,” he insisted, must replace blind loyalty to the proletariat or party.

At this time in his life, Howe was reluctant to consider his moral sensibilities religious. He did not believe in God, at least not in any supernatural or personal form. He had grown up in a culture of secular socialism, not orthodox religion. “[W]e had no taste for and little interest in Judaism as a religion,” he wrote. Although he appreciated the primitive Christianity of Silone’s novels, religion, for Howe, brought to mind two unappealing concepts: traditional dogmatism and irrational mysticism. His rejection of both these extremes in religion was reinforced by



his disdain for corresponding political tendencies: authoritarianism and anarchy.

In time, however, Howe began to acknowledge that his socialism contained at least quasi-religious elements.

“Comparisons between radical politics and religious practice are likely to be glib, especially when used to dismiss the substance of the radical case,” Howe wrote in his memoir, “yet in thinking back to these years I’m forced to recognize, not very comfortably, that there were some parallels between the two.”

In the 1980s, a critic accused Howe of entertaining religious sentiments in his vision of socialism. “I was supposed to be devastated by this charge, but I was not,” Howe recalled. “If by ‘religious’ one means here a faith for rational men and women, in behalf of which they can devote their best efforts even while remaining aware that the ultimate goal may never be fully realized, then yes, you can say a socialist belief has a ‘religious’ component,” he conceded. “But then,” Howe continued, “so does any other serious political view.”

As Silone once said, “Revolutions, like trees, are to be judged by their fruits, and not by the effort they cost.” In spite of disappointments, Silone, Howe, Day, MacDonald, and Lynd each found reasons to carry on the struggle. If immediate revolution proved intractable, they remained faithful to the process of a long-term revolution, built upon basic moral values and the spirit of community. Silone took comfort in “the fact that spiritual communion is possible. . . . Love of the oppressed is born from it as a corollary that the disillusionments of history . . . can never place in doubt. To be valid,” Silone declared, “it does not need success.”

Until recently, scholars and commentators have talked more about the failures than the successes of socialism in America. But Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign and the strong following he has cultivated around ideals of equality, democracy, and social justice indicate that the long-term struggle for democratic socialism has found new footing in the United States. Sanders presents his policies in terms of morality, not dogma. He appeals to voters’ democratic ideals

and community ethos above established party politics. He suggests, in short, that those who find solidarity in shared suffering may find a way forward by going back to basic moral principles, the same way Silone did in the 1930s. “The challenges facing our planet are not mainly technological or even financial, because as a world we are rich enough . . . to meet our needs and to protect the planet,” Sanders concluded a recent address at the Vatican. “Our challenge is mostly a moral one, to redirect our efforts and vision to the common good.” When Bernie Sanders speaks today of democratic socialism as a moral project, he evokes the spirit of Silone, who encouraged a generation of disillusioned radicals to keep faith in people and human values even when political movements face seemingly insurmountable odds.

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