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Social history and the history of socialism: French socialist municipalities in the 1890's

by Joan Wallach SCOTT

One of social history's contributions has been to examine in context, closely and concretely, events which have largely been analyzed from the perspective of national history or in terms of long-term evolutionary theories. The result has been a clearer picture of historical experience, the provision of greater detail about the lives of people in the past, and a modification or revision of previous generalizations. This paper is meant to exemplify one of the uses of social history for the study of the history of socialism.

It is, I hope, an appropriate tribute to Georges Haupt who contributed to the dialogue between social history and the history of socialism in his writings, lectures, and discussions with students both in France and the United States. It suffers from Georges' absence because if I had been able to discuss these issues with him, this paper would have been a better one, informed by his insight, knowledge and understanding.

In most histories of French socialism little attention is paid to the flowering of socialist municipalities in the 1890's. Yet it was an extensive movement. On May 1, 1892, Guesdist won a majority on 23 municipal councils, among them those of Toulon, Roubaix, Montluçon and Narbonne. Victories by other socialist groups brought the total to 60 communes. In 1896, 1 1/2 million votes were cast for socialists who now held a majority in 150 municipalities including Marseille, Lille and Limoges and were a strong minority in 75 others (1). The movement continued, with fluctuations, into the twentieth century. Indeed there are cities today that have remained socialist since those first victories at the end of the nineteenth century.

For the most part the municipal movement has been treated as a minor episode in the history of the national socialist movement. It has been used to illustrate reformist political strategy; described as an important step on the way to unity in 1905; and analyzed as a beginning of the integration of workers into French politics (2). On this last point the prediction, written in 1891, of M. Magnien, deputy from the Saône-et-Loire, has become the conclusion of many historians. Magnien urged the Chamber of Deputies not to change the date of the 1892 municipal election even though it coincided with May Day.

For my part [he wrote] I see no disadvantage in letting the May demonstration coincide with the municipal elections. To hold the elections early would perhaps give the demonstration a significance it doesn't have: we would seem to be recoiling [in fear] from it. They say May 1 is a celebration of labor. An election is a celebration of universal suffrage. The two will become comingled and that will be all to the good! (3).

From one perspective it is undeniable that municipal victories gave workers a sense that they could use the vote to their advantage and, perhaps even in the long run, to create socialism. Leaders like Guesde repeatedly told them as much (4). But from another angle that interpretation misses an important aspect of the municipal socialist experience. It ignores the motives of and the dilemmas faced by local socialists. In attempting to explain why a socialist revolution did not occur in France, it retrospectively assigns blame. Voting is equated with integration; the absence of revolution is seen as positive acceptance of membership in the French nation state. This interpretation substitutes a conclusion drawn from hindsight for an understanding of the historical experience of the 1890's. A different look at the history of socialist municipalities leads to a reevaluation not only of the local experience, but perhaps of the national movement's strategies as well.

The socialists advocated the use of political rights to gain justice and equality. Indeed they looked to a long tradition in French history in which workers, democratically represented in the commune, had


(3) « Pour ma part [...] je ne vois aucun inconvénient à laisser coïncider la manifestation du 1er mai avec les élections municipales. Avancer les élections serait peut-être donner à la manifestation un caractère qu'elle n'a pas : on aurait l'air de reculer. Et puis on dit que la fête du 1er mai est une fête du travail. Une élection est une fête du suffrage universel. Elles se confondraient et ce serait très bien! » Archives of the Prefecture of Police of Paris, BA 46.

saved the Republic and instilled it with revolutionary purpose. The republican form of government, socialists said, made possible the realization of the revolutionary transformation of social and economic relationships implied in the idea they championed of «une république sociale». Political strategies implied that the sovereign people could make its will felt by voting. The municipal strategy had an additional purpose: to create within the bourgeois state an alternative model of government (5). In the town hall socialists claimed they had installed a new political system that exemplified the practices and values of the economic system they would one day create.

French socialist municipalities utilized political rights for subversive ends. The city hall in socialist hands was a defensive retreat from, but not an abandonment of class struggle. In the face of what was proving to be an enduring capitalism and a repressive state, the socialists's municipal strategy aimed at creating a protected terrain within which class organizations and working class culture could survive.

Socialism at the municipal level offered an opportunity for the concrete exemplification of rhetorical phrases and abstract theory (6). It gave workers a powerful sense of belonging to a community united around its interests as a class. Although Possibilists disagreed with Guesdists about the efficacy of reform in a capitalist society, both groups enacted similar measures when they conquered a Hôtel de Ville.

These measures have been classified under four rubrics: 1) revamping municipal finances, 2) creation of municipal enterprises, 3) encouraging and protecting organizational efforts of workers, 4) reform and extension of public assistance (7). Major transformations of the basis of taxation, as well as municipalisation of gas, water and transportation, when tried usually were prohibited by State authorities. Attempts to use city funds to set up free pharmacies or to provide free legal consultation were challenged and usually overruled by the Conseil d'Etat as violations of free enterprise. Thus most efforts of local socialists were directed to the third and fourth areas listed above: working class organization and welfare.

When a Hôtel de Ville was in socialist hands all forms of working class activity were encouraged (8). In some areas, municipal funds were used to purchase a building for a Bourse du Travail thus

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(6) See WILLARD, p. 159: «L'étude de la doctrine est-elle inéparable de celle de la propagande et de l'action collectiviste?»


guaranteeing its members against eviction by a landlord who disapproved of their politics. During strikes socialist municipal councils donated money to workers and their families. They underwrote the appearance in town of national socialist celebrities. And they encouraged the formation of study groups, clubs and unions. Above all, they provided protection from the police, the repressive arm and most immediate exemplification of state power.

The speeches and actions of socialists reiterate the theme of opposition to the police and so demonstrate its importance. At public meetings held to rally voters, build morale during strikes or explain socialist doctrine and recruit new followers, socialist orators invariably lashed out at the police. As if following a script, a speaker would interrupt his talk to mock the self-importance of the commissaire and reveal his identity.

Pointing to the back of the room, a speaker in Riom announced « That mouchard is here simply to spy on us » (9).

As cries of « Vive la Commune » filled a hall in Roubaix, Jules Guesde egged his audience on : « M. the commissaire de police can mention this in his report. [...] At least it will show he has done something useful » (10).

When, during a speech in Nouzon by Jean-Baptiste Clément, someone warned that the police were there taking notes, he replied that he was not afraid (11).

At Castres in 1895, A. Briand « spoke of policemen, of decorated spies and terrorist Prefects. [...] He described the Prefect of the Tarn as a grotesque imbecile, an evil puppet, valet to the rich and aggressor against the poor. [...] And he complained of the presence of three commissaires de police in the room » (12).

The remarks generally provided relief during an otherwise serious exposition. Crowds hooted and laughed, hurled epithets at the commissaires in the room and defiantly shouted revolutionary slogans in unison. These moments, repeated in town after town, welded the audience and speaker in a ritual denunciation of their enemy. There was a sense of outrage and solidarity as socialists and their followers verbally attacked the police and displayed their determination to keep them from invading working class terrain — in this case the public meeting hall.

The experience in the lecture hall was reenacted on the streets, often though not necessarily during a strike. Municipal councillors and mayors then used authority of public office to prevent or challenge invasions of workers' rights by agents of the State. Events

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(9) « Tu n'as rien à voir avec ce muffle-là, il est là pour espionner et c'est tout. » Archives nationales, BB 18 1969, Doss. 995 A 94 (6 avril 1894).

(10) « M. le Commissaire de police peut mentionner cela dans son procès-verbal et l'envoyer à M. Dupuy. [...] Il verra au moins que les commissaires de police servent à quelque chose. » AN, BB 18 1966 (6 février 1894).

(11) « Faites attention citoyen Clément, le Commissaire central [...] est près de vous et l'on prend des notes. » AN BB 18 1969 (19 mars 1894).

(12) « Il parle des gendarmes, des mouchards galonnés et des préfets terroriseurs [...]. Il traite le préfet du Tarn de grotesque imbécile, de fantoche mal-faisant plat valet vis-à-vis des grands et agresseur vis-à-vis des petits. [...] Il se plaint de la présence de trois commissaires de police dans la salle. » AN F 7 12495 (Albi, 1er septembre 1895).
in Montluçon on August 20, 1893 exemplify the nature of the challenge.

As the commissioner of police of the metal-working city rode past a bar on the trolley, someone shouted an insult at him. « Do you see that pig of a police commissioner? » The commissioner jumped off the tramway and strode up to the group he believed responsible.

Among the men assembled was the newly elected socialist mayor, Jean Dormoy. Dormoy stepped in front of him, as if to block his way and asked, « What are you doing? Leave these people alone. You are disturbing the peace » (13). General hilarity followed, most of it at the expense of the dignity of the commissaire. At least that was what he reported to the Prefect. None of the seventeen witnesses questioned could remember the incident clearly and the government had to drop its charges against the Mayor for « insults to a state functionary in the exercise of his office » (14).

Later that same day, the Mayor again confronted the commissaire. This time it was at the office of the sub-Prefect at 10:30 in the evening. A crowd which had gathered was being dispersed by the commissaire and someone shouted at him « dirty pig » (cochon et salope). Hardly had the police chief grabbed the man by his collar when Dormoy appeared, his official mayoral insignia (son écharpe) in his hand. Dormoy, asserting his formal power, ordered the police chief to let the man go. The chief told the Mayor not to interfere with his job, which he was fulfilling under orders from the sub-Prefect. The Mayor replied that he, not the sub-Prefect, was the police chief’s superior. Then Dormoy and others pushed (foncèrent) against the commissaire forcing him to release his grip on the prisoner. Dormoy told the man to « beat it » (va-t-en) and he vanished into the crowd. The commissaire turned to the Mayor and accused him of violently assisting a prisoner’s escape. Despite conflicting testimony, Dormoy was this time convicted of a violation of the penal code.

These incidents were part of an ongoing dispute between Dormoy and the commissaire. Indeed a report commented that « relations have been very strained for a long time between the mayor and the police » (15). They typify as well a more general pattern of conflict in other socialist municipalities. The visible embodiment of state power in the commune was the commissaire. In challenging police authority, the Mayor insisted on his own legitimacy, on his right to assert the will of the people. That is why Dormoy wore his mayoral sash (son écharpe). It signified that he was a representative elected by the people. It demonstrated to his constituents his willingness to use the power of his office to serve and protect their interests. Moreover Dormoy claimed that he, not the sub-prefect, had the right to give orders to the police. Like him, other socialist mayors insisted that

(13) « Le vois-tu cette canaille de commissaire central. » « Que faites-vous là? Laissez donc les gens tranquilles, vous ne faites que troubler l'ordre. » AN BB 18 1948, doss. 2360 A 93 (29 décembre 1893).

(14) « Outrages à un magistrat de l'ordre administratif », ibid.

(15) « Depuis longtemps les relations sont très tendues entre le maire et les représentants de la police. » Ibid. For examples of other incidents in other cities see AN BB 18 1969, doss. 1049 A 94 (22 mars 1894) on Narbonne; BB 18 2045, doss. 2472 A 96 (30 septembre 1896) on Carmaux; F 7 12490, report on the Congrès de Lyon (1891).
the commissaire was under their jurisdiction and that his defiance, not theirs, was illegal. Dormoy’s actions dramatically conveyed both a political and a personal challenge to the agent who spied on workers, broke up their meetings and arrested them during strikes. In the confrontations between socialist mayors and the commissaires de police, the abstract entities of justice and injustice, universal suffrage and the state, rights of association and repression were personalized and given human form. The mayor was the collective voice of the workers who had elected him and he provided a new line of defense within the town against state repression.

The words of orators and the actions of mayors were sometimes carried further by the workers themselves. In Carmaux, for example, in 1893, miners and glassworkers threw garbage at and insulted policemen who were patrolling the streets. Wrote the Prefect of the Tarn:

Carmaux believes itself to be a state within the state. The gendarmes are the objects of grave violence [...], a policeman’s life is in danger [...]. There is no longer safety for representatives of the law nor for agents of the mining company. They are deluged by a multitude which lacks all respect for them (16).

Popular democracy here challenged the right of the State to intervene in local affairs. Workers mobilized to protect their rights within the town whose government they controlled. In each case the choice of the police as a target was deliberate. They were the immediate obstacles to working class collective action and to the expression of the popular will.

If the sense of the socialist municipality as a protector of working class organization was evident in confrontations with the police, it was even more explicit in social welfare policies. When socialists took office they allocated more money than had been spent by previous administrations for various forms of public assistance including food and clothing for needy children, sanatoria for sick children, maternity hospitals, crèches, old age homes, public baths and strike benefits for workers. In addition to financial assistance, the councils tried to give the workers a sense of control over urban institutions by, for example, appointing workers in place of clerics to the boards of charitable institutions.

Not only did the socialists expand public assistance, they redefined their reasons for supporting it. In contrast to what they deemed the humiliating paternalism of previous administrations, they saw themselves fulfilling the obligations of society to guarantee the health, education and subsistence of its members. The obligations were likened to those of parents to children, of one family member to another. Indeed the « socialist conception » the municipalities tried to realize was that of the rights and duties of family members (17).

(16) «Carmaux se croit toujours un Etat dans l'Etat, [...]. Aujourd'hui, [...] la gendarmerie objet de violences graves et un agent de police en danger de mort [...] Il n'y a plus de sécurité, ni pour les représentants de la loi, ni pour les agents de la Compagnie des Mines, noyés dans la multitude affranchie de tout respect...» AD Tarn, IV M2 74.
(17) Marpaux, p. 387; Stehelin, p. 28, 47-48.
When, for example, the socialist Conseil Municipal of Roubaix gave free clothing and hot lunches to school children, it acted as a surrogate family, substituting its functions for those of « the ruined and poor individual family destroyed by capitalist rule » (18). In discussing the creation of a sanatorium at the seashore for sick children, a Roubaïsien socialist editor evoked the intimacy of parental emotions (vos petits, vos bébés mamans, nos chers marmots) and attributed them to the socialist council:

Only the socialist commune can put into practice such generous ideas, because socialism in the commune transforms the commune into a big family (19).

The family meant egalitarianism and a willingness to share resources with those who needed them, unselfish devotion and loyalty to one's kin and the recognition of reciprocal duties and rights. In its idealized version at least, it was something one could turn to or depend on when all else failed: a place of last resort where personalized concern replaced bureaucratic disdain. By depicting socialism in these terms local leaders suggested an extension of resources and control to workers over decisions affecting the welfare of their families (20).

In France discussions of a need to protect the working class family seem to have intensified during the 1880's and 1890's. If the language of bourgeois reformers and socialists was often the same, their purposes nonetheless differed. While legislators of the Third Republic wanted a strong family to instill morality and discipline in the working class, socialists and trade unionists saw the family as a unit of economic protection and political resistance. The family was a cooperative, humanizing institution, a school for socialist values and class consciousness in a capitalist society.

Of course, working class ties long had been depicted in family or kinship terms. Fraternité, which depicted class relations as family relations, was the slogan of the French working class movement throughout the nineteenth century. Still in the 1890's, at the civil baptisms favored by socialist militants, god-parents solemnly pledged to instill in a child collectivist principles. Then « the lips of the child were wet with wine — the wine of fraternity » (21). But if fraternité was the cry of the working class in 1848 and in the 1890's, the image conjured up was different in the two periods. In 1848 fraternité was meant literally as brotherhood, the brotherhood of craftsmen, the members of trade corporation. The emphasis was on male bonds and trade ties. Working relationships were like family relationship,

(19) « Il n'y a que la Commune socialiste qui puisse faire entrer dans la pratique de si généreuses idées car le socialisme à la Commune c'est la Commune devenue une grande famille. » Stauve, p. 52.
(21) « Puis on trempe les lèvres des chérubins dans un verre du vin — le vin de la fraternité. » Quoted in Willard, p. 162.
but it was the association of workers that was projected as the basis for an alternative social order (The atelier would become the atelier social). By the 1890's, capitalism had conquered the organization of workplace and socialists looked to the family, with its collectivization of resources and cooperative division of labor in the interests of group welfare, as a concrete example of their principles. If the fraternité of 1848 spoke of an assault on society, references to family in the 1890's signified protection of workers from capitalism and the state. That was suggested in the socialist’s use of family metaphors that stressed the ties between parents and children. They spoke of solicitous care, the provision of necessities and the protection of individuals from the ravages of ill-health or destitution. Like a working class family, but on a larger scale, the socialist commune was depicted as a shelter against the ultimate alienation and impoverishment of capitalism.

A campaign song for the municipal election of 1896 in Roubaix summed up the significance of socialist victories. It addressed a local capitalist:

You are stuffed with riches gained by the
sweat of the worker
You have houses and mistresses
You are the king at the factory.
Alas, what vexes you despite your wealth and your gold:
You are nothing at the city hall and you never will be (22).

The song reflects the sense of autonomy and control workers could have when they ran the city hall. It was their domain. As they did in the domestic foyer, so they reigned in the Hôtel de Ville, though the capitalists continued as undisputed kings of the factories. The autonomy and control were limited and narrow, local and protective, not national or offensive. Indeed local political control was an alternative to, perhaps consolation for the economic wealth and power of factory owners. In the face of the intractability of capitalist and state power, socialists attempted to build enclaves of resistance and perpetuate a sense of working class non-acceptance of, if not active opposition to, a bourgeois republican France.

Even at this they did not entirely succeed. State authorities and local anti-socialists launched extensive campaigns to stem the socialist tide. Mayors were fined and arrested for « outrages against public authority ». They were suspended and then disqualified from running for office because they had been convicted. In defiance of these suspensions, voters reelected their socialist mayors, only to have them

(22) « Vous êtes gavés de richesses
Par les sueurs de l'ouvrier
Vous avez chevaux et maîtresses
Vous êtes rois à l'atelier.
Hélas ! ce qui vous contrarie
Malgré vos moyens et votre or
Vous n'êtes rien à la mairie
Et vous n'y serez rien encore. »

arrested again for some infraction of the law. In what Rolande Trempé describes as an atmosphere of « civil war » in Carmaux, the authorities managed to

strike the most active and esteemed militants and to decapitate the municipality as well as organizations and unions (23).

Even if socialists were not everywhere eliminated from municipal office their power was weakened and their actions increasingly circumscribed by vigilant prefects and their aides. In this way, the potential of socialist cities to shelter working class populations was limited and sometimes destroyed. Indeed, it is in the interaction of socialist municipalities and state authority that the explanation for the failure of revolution must be sought. The socialist political strategy — at the local and national levels — reveals not the limits of socialist imagination but the power of French capitalism and the State.

A close examination of the words and actions of socialist municipal leaders in the 1890's calls into question the integrationist thesis. Workers who voted for socialists in municipal elections were not simply « buying in » to French politics to assert their claims as a new interest group. That was how the State ultimately defined their actions ; that was the lesson M. Magnien hoped to teach. But socialists were using the vote as a challenge to, not an endorsement of the bourgeois republican order. Especially at the municipal level, a socialist political victory could have tangible results. Capturing a city hall meant enlarging the domain of resistance to capitalism and creating a protected enclave within which resistance might be organized.

In one sense, the strategy failed, for it never won political power at the national level and certainly never fulfilled the professed revolutionary aspirations of the leaders. In another sense, however, it had noteworthy success. The extraordinary longevity of socialism in many municipalities and the strength of working class culture in France stem, at least in part, from the efforts begun in the 1890's by socialists in the communes.

Their experience suggests the need to reexamine the socialists' municipal strategy, not as a phase in the long-term evolution of ideology and formal national organizations, but in the context of the 1890's. The local experience deepens and complicates our understanding of the national experience. It perhaps also calls for a conceptualization of le mouvement social which thinks not in linear evolutionary terms, but in terms of different forms of struggle at different times by workers against capitalism and the nation-state.