

Whitman's Socialism

In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America from Itself, by John Marsh. Monthly Review Press, New York, 2015, 248 pages, \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-58367-475-8

by R. Burke

In the 19th century when the socialist movement first appeared, one of its strengths was the diversity of its adherents. Socialism could appeal to people of strong religious convictions or none at all. Even a committed atheist and materialist such as Karl Marx could argue that such diversity was crucial for socialism to succeed, and on that basis oppose making atheism the official position of the First International.

With the success of the Bolshevik revolution all this changed. Ignoring the wisdom of Marx, Marxist-Leninist parties made atheism their official position. Regardless of one's philosophical or religious viewpoint, can a political movement that pressures potential followers and supporters to choose between religion and socialism ever successfully challenge the intellectual hegemony of capitalism? In a recent *Monthly Review* article ("Popular Movements Toward Socialism: Their

time Camden had been "an up-and-coming industrial city," but that today it is a testament to de-industrialization and urban decay. Through his visiting of these landmarks, Marsh hoped to gain some insight into Whitman the poet.

His observations on the lack of a gift shop there (under construction at the time) provide an opportunity to examine Whitman's own views on the commercialization of his work, particularly the "Walt Whitman cigars" that had appeared during the last years of his life. Far from being upset at the way his image had been used without permission to sell cigars, Whitman was amused and saw it as a way in which his work could become known to a wider public.

Marsh next takes a trip on the Brooklyn ferry, in order to gain an insight into Whitman's views on property and death as expressed in the poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." He calls attention to Whitman's recognition that not even the atoms of his body could strictly speaking be called his, for they were continuously being exchanged with the universe around him. This led Whitman to consider property to be an illusion, since we never truly possess anything permanently. Whatever we think we own is in fact continuously slipping away from us. Seen from this perspective even death is a kind of fundamental act of generosity, in which all that we once thought was "ours," even our bodies, is now returned to the Cosmos.

This leads Marsh to investigate, in an interlude entitled "Was Walt Whitman Socialist?" what Whitman's actual political views were. In this he relies heavily on the reminiscences of Horace Traubel,

himself a socialist and friend of Whitman. It seems that, like many spiritually minded people who do not go deeply into the study of the subject of political economy, Whitman's views were quite vague. What does stand out is that regarding his sentiments, he could say: "I'm a good deal more of a socialist than I thought I was... Maybe not technically, politically so, but intrinsically, in my meanings." In his writings Whitman asserted a belief in the dignity of labor, was deeply committed to equality and democracy, and frequently denounced the pursuit of riches. When pushed to be more specific about his

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Unity and Diversity," *Monthly Review* June 2014), Samir Amin has argued that a return to the diversity of the 19th century socialist movement is a necessary step for the achievement of socialism.

This is why John Marsh's *In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America from Itself*, is an important contribution. *In Walt We Trust* is the most unusual book this reviewer has seen from Monthly Review Press: in some ways more literary criticism or "self-help" book than politics. To be sure, Marsh identifies himself as a "run-of-the-mill atheist" who espouses materialism. Despite this he finds a powerful inspiration in his readings of Whitman's poetry, to the point of recognizing that if the poet's views were more widely spread, the US would be a much more progressive country than it is today.

What makes Mr. Marsh's book particularly compelling is the way in which he grounds it in his personal experience. An associate professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, with a wife and child, Marsh turns to Whitman in an attempt to find meaning in capitalist society and sustain his commitment as a socialist. His voyage to an understanding of Whitman is recounted through a kind of secular pilgrimage to landmarks associated with Whitman's life.

Marsh begins in Camden, New Jersey, where the house that Whitman lived in is maintained as an historical landmark. He notes that during Whitman's

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agreement with the socialist political program, however, he answered that “I am with them in the result—that’s all I can say.” For Whitman, the result however was “putting the crown on man—taking it off things. Ain’t we all socialists, after all?”

Marsh argues that such socialist sympathies matter more than agreement with specific policies. “We too want to put the crown on man and take it off things. We may disagree about how to do so, but Whitman, intrinsically socialist, and socialist in his meanings, reminds us why we want—and should want—to do so.”

What Marsh also finds inspiring in Whitman is his attitude towards the body and its pleasures. While Whitman was a man of powerful spiritual ideals and religious beliefs, he seems to have avoided the body and sex, negative attitudes often associated with traditional religion. Indeed, his views seem more in tune with heretical and esoteric currents of thought in both western and eastern cultures, in which sexuality is explored as a means of spiritual liberation. Because of this, many 19th readers and critics looked upon Whitman’s writings as lewd and obscene. As a materialist, Marsh finds much to sympathize with in Whitman’s attitudes. From this a thornier question arises, namely, was Walt Whitman gay?

Marsh is clearly sympathetic to the arguments of those who claim that he was. Problems in demonstrating this arise because homosexuality as an identity, as opposed to the practice of homoerotic acts, was not exactly recognized until the 1880s.

Also to be considered is that the expression of affection between males was more accepted by the culture of the time and was not seen as implying erotic attraction. In fact, when one British writer repeatedly wrote Whitman asking about his sexuality over a period of decades, when he finally did reply he angrily denied that his poems had anything to do with homoerotic acts. Marsh argues that while there is a lot of circumstantial evidence that suggests that Whitman was gay, he also “appears never to have thought of himself as gay. At times he seems to have tried very hard not to be gay.” Instead Marsh asks if Whitman could be considered queer, meaning, “differing from what is usual or ordinary, especially but not only when it comes to sexuality.” He considers the answer to that question to be an unequivocal yes.

Marsh’s pilgrimage ends at Whitman’s tomb, a place that he admits he hates because it is imposing and monumental, in contrast to the poet’s own personal qualities. He comes to find, in Whitman’s vision of affection as the cure for the ills of democracy, a powerful stimulus for political persistence. “Thanks in part to Whitman, we know where democracy in the United States must head: toward affection, toward friendship, toward a nation founded on care.”

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What Marsh’s book actually demonstrates, in ways even the author may not have fathomed, is that Whitman is a part of an often-neglected current of thought. This is what Peter Lamborn Wilson has called the Hermetic Left, a current of historical figures who combined an esoteric and mystical spirituality, often of an unconventional, even heretical nature, with a commitment to progressive politics. Stretching from William Blake to Philip K. Dick, this tendency intersects with romanticism and symbolism, surrealism and the Frankfurt School, utopian socialism and science fiction. Like those on

the Socialist left who advocated for decentralized, cooperative, worker self-managed forms of socialism, the Hermetic Left was suppressed and ignored throughout the 20th century by forces of the orthodox left. With the collapse and abandonment of Marxist-Leninism perhaps the moment has arrived for these alternatives to emerge from the underground?

What *In Walt We Trust*; *How a Queer Socialist Poet can Save America from Itself* makes clear is that even those committed to a strictly atheist and materialist viewpoint can find much of value in the works of those whose spiritual orientation causes them to look in a different direction. The time has come for the building of a more diverse socialist movement. Perhaps in that we can all find unity and even solidarity.

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