

Marxism and the political economy of Paul Sweezy

Part 1: Early influences

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This is the first part of a series of articles by Nick Beams, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, dealing with the life and work of radical political economist Paul Sweezy, founder-editor of the Monthly Review, who died in Larchmont, New York on February 27, 2004.

The death on February 27 of Paul Sweezy, aged 93, saw the passing of one of the most influential figures of American radicalism. While Sweezy was not the leader of an organised political tendency, he played a significant political role in the US and internationally—both through the *Monthly Review* magazine he established in 1949, and his writings on Marxist political economy and American capitalism.

In reviewing Sweezy's life and work, one must have regard for the complex interaction between his theoretical positions and the development of the social and political environment in which he worked. Sweezy's biography cannot be written simply from the standpoint of the unfolding of his views on Marxist political economy and, what were in my view, his significant differences with Marx's analysis of capitalism. Sweezy's theoretical positions were, themselves, the outcome of a definite political orientation.

There is no such thing as "Marxist economics" conceived simply as an analysis of the workings of capitalist economy. In fact, such an analysis can itself only be developed through a critique of the prevailing bourgeois theories—a critique that is directed toward establishing the political independence of the working class. Separated from this, "Marxist" political economy simply becomes a "left" version of the dominant ideology.

Sweezy's turn to Marxism, and his study of political economy in particular, took place under the impact of the Great Depression, which not only shattered the world economy but also all those economic theories that maintained such an event was impossible.

Politically, the decade was shaped by the consolidation of Stalinist rule in the USSR and, after the coming to power of Hitler in Germany in 1933, the rise of the Stalinist-dominated popular fronts, which insisted on the subordination of the working class to so-called "democratic" or anti-fascist sections of the ruling class.

Sweezy was rightly critical of the efforts of various Stalinist "theoreticians" to turn Marxism into some kind of ossified dogma. Later, he scathingly recalled the reluctance of friends to comment on his book *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (published in 1942) because Moscow had not made its position known. Such criticisms, however, never went any further and Sweezy's political outlook was deeply affected by the popular front politics of the Stalinist-influenced

radical milieu. This orientation was to be reflected both in his writings on political economy and in the *Monthly Review*.

From the standpoint of his background, Sweezy might appear as a somewhat unlikely candidate to become, in the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, "the 'dean' of radical economists" or, as J. K. Galbraith put it, "the most noted American Marxist scholar" of the second half of the twentieth century.

Harvard, LSE and World War II

Paul Sweezy was born on April 10, 1910, the son of Everett B. Sweezy, vice president of the First National Bank of New York (predecessor to Citibank). He was educated at Philips Exeter Academy, an elite New England boarding school and Harvard University, where he studied economics. After his graduation Sweezy continued his education at the London School of Economics (LSE), where he was influenced by LSE Professor of Political Science and leading British intellectual, Harold Laski. He became, in his own words, "a convinced but very ignorant Marxist."

Radicalised by the experience of the Great Depression and the coming to power of Hitler in Germany, Sweezy later recalled another influence on his early development. Replying to a question (in 1979) about which authors had influenced his writing style, he listed Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Snow, and then added: "One more: Trotsky, whose *History of the Russian Revolution* [which had just been translated] ... played an important role in converting a very bourgeois American first-year graduate student into a Marxist (my admiration for Trotsky as a writer never led me to become a political Trotskyist.)" [1]

Upon his return to Harvard in 1933, Sweezy began work for his doctorate, writing his dissertation on the coal cartel during the Industrial Revolution. Regarded as one of the most brilliant young intellectuals in the department, he formed a close personal association with the Austrian economist Josef Schumpeter, who had taken a post at the prestigious university. Schumpeter, as Sweezy later recalled, was a "unique figure" among twentieth century economists. Understanding the intellectual importance of Marx his "own attempt at a comprehensive theory of capitalism was deliberately architected as an alternative to Marxism." [2]

In 1938, Sweezy became an instructor in the Economics Department

at Harvard and a founder of the Harvard Teachers' Union. During the 1930s, he was a member of the League Against Fascism and War and various popular front organisations. While he never joined the Communist Party, he later recalled that he might easily have done so, indicating that he had no significant differences with its political orientation.

But what of Sweezy's attitude to the Trotskyist movement, given his remarks about the impact of the *History of the Russian Revolution* on his own development? Sweezy's indifference, if not outright hostility, to Trotsky's political analysis—the exposure of Stalinism and its popular front politics—expressed the outlook of a layer of radical intellectuals in the US. They supported the Russian revolution and were even inspired and moved by it. But inasmuch as they conceived the revolution as a national Russian event—and not as the first shot in the world socialist revolution—they opposed the very backbone of Trotsky's politics: his internationalist outlook and insistence upon the intransigent struggle for the political independence of the working class. It cut across their orientation to the liberal bourgeoisie and to the Roosevelt administration.

In 1942, Sweezy left Harvard to join the army, following the entry of the US into the Second World War in December 1941. Like a number of other intellectuals at that time, he ended up in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and, in 1943, was sent to London, where one of his tasks was to follow British economic policy. Even in the midst of the war, the Roosevelt administration was laying its plans for post-war economic development, among which was the dismantling of the British empire, along with its system of protectionism and empire preference.

When Sweezy left Harvard he still had two years on his five-year contract as an assistant professor. During the war, a tenured position came up and Sweezy was one of the final two candidates. Despite the strong support of Schumpeter, however, he did not get the post. Returning in 1945, he soon discovered from his friends that “there was no possibility of the department agreeing on my being retained with tenure” and that “there was never any chance they would take a Marxist.” [3]

Sweezy decided that, since he was never going to obtain a tenured position, he would not serve out the remaining two years of his teaching contract. He was able to maintain himself on the money left him by his father.

The Wallace campaign

In 1948, Sweezy became heavily involved in the presidential candidacy of Henry Wallace. Wallace, who had been Roosevelt's vice-president, was dumped from the position of Secretary of Commerce in 1946 by the Truman administration, over what was regarded as too great an accommodation to the Soviet Union. Wallace campaigned as the leader of the Progressive Party in the 1948 elections, pledging to continue the policies of Roosevelt, negotiations with the Soviet Union, economic planning, and the development of what he called “progressive capitalism.”

In the deepening cold war atmosphere, Wallace's campaign was a failure. Sweezy, together with the radical journalist Leo Huberman, maintained that Wallace's movement should have articulated a socialist alternative. What was needed, they decided, was a periodical

that analysed current affairs from such a standpoint. But when Sweezy criticised the lack of socialism in the Wallace campaign, he was not proposing the development of a political struggle based on the working class. Rather, his perspective was to maintain the intellectual and political milieu that had characterised the period of the popular front and the Second World War—Rooseveltian style reforms at home, combined with a pro-Soviet orientation internationally.

In 1949, the opportunity to establish such a publication came when a friend of Sweezy's from Harvard, the literary scholar F. O. Matthiessen, came into an inheritance. Matthiessen offered to make available to Huberman and Sweezy \$5,000 a year for each of the next three years to publish their proposed magazine. *Monthly Review* was launched in May 1949, featuring an article by Albert Einstein entitled “Why Socialism?”

But, in the aftermath of the war, the political environment had changed dramatically as a wide section of the liberal milieu, together with the trade union bureaucracy, swung behind the Cold War and the launching of the anti-Communist witch-hunts that accompanied it. Both Huberman and Sweezy were attacked. Huberman was called before Senator McCarthy's Senate committee in 1953. The New Hampshire Attorney General subpoenaed Sweezy on two occasions in 1954 as part of investigations into “subversive activities.” The proceedings against Sweezy concerned the Wallace election campaign—Sweezy had been its chairman in New Hampshire—as well as the contents of a lecture he had delivered and whether or not he believed in Communism. Sweezy refused to answer on the basis of the first amendment to the US constitution providing for freedom of speech and was jailed for contempt of court. Freed on appeal, his case went to the US Supreme Court, where his conviction was overturned in 1957—a sign that the McCarthy era was coming to an end.

To be continued.

Notes:

1. cited in John Bellamy Foster Memorial Service for Paul Marlor Sweezy, *Monthly Review* March 2004
2. Interview with Paul Sweezy conducted by Sungar Savran and E. Ahmet Tonak published in *Monthly Review* April 1987
3. *ibid*



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