

failed to make the creation of a socialist alternative to capitalism a central part of its agenda. But mainly the New Left like its predecessors became alienated from the American mainstream seeking some revolutionary agent of change in foreign anti-imperialist movements or in one or another particular group within America society.

Unlike much of the left Weinstein thought that the majority of Americans were part of a greatly varied working class that shared a potential common interest in the liberation of human potential that a truly democratic socialism could bring. There was a tendency in the latter days of the New Left for many radicals to see America—sometimes spelled with three k's—as the enemy but Jim believed that the ideals of socialism could have wide appeal.

And contrary to many on the left Weinstein thought not only that electoral political work was essential—fighting to win elections and not just “educate” voters—but also that in most circumstances socialists should fight their battle in Democratic primaries not through third parties with dim prospects resulting from the structure of American political institutions. He was an enthusiastic supporter of politicians like Chicago Mayor Harold Washington the late Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) and Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) who if not all openly socialist were and are able to fight effectively for popular democracy fairness and equality. In *The Long Detour* he identifies socialism with expansive educational opportunities universal health care electoral reform and other programs that might have been at home in the old Socialist Party of Debs.

Last year he was planning to launch an institute focused on long-term strategy and implementing the ideals of socialism but his illness made it impossible. Somebody else will have to take up the task one to which Jim creatively devoted his life.

David Moberg is a senior editor of *In These Times*.

Unapologetic Radical

Jim Weinstein was the lefty's lefty an unabashed socialist. But he was no ideologue. He was an intellectual who participated in observed and dissected most every major twist and turn of the American left.

He was a public intellectual who

believed that compromise and winning were possible. He had no truck with blind ideology.

In this Red State New World moderation can be a curse. Still Weinstein was an unapologetic radical yet a radical who embraced the system. In politics he argued being effective is more important than being right. In *The Long Detour* he wrote “Choosing the outsider's route ... is to leave the game—or at best to stand on the sidelines as ultimately feckless kibitzers.”

He held no patience for political poseurs. He was so right. In the 2000 presidential election Weinstein unmasked what would become a feckless but fatal folly. His essay “Nader: Why I'm Not Voting for Ralph” netted a slew of canceled subscriptions for *In These Times*. If only more of us had listened.

In the last year of his life Weinstein was very very busy toiling away at the finishing touches of a very mainstream concept—a think tank that would harvest the best ideas of the left. Meanwhile he was deploying chunks of his family's New York real estate holdings into progressive campaigns around the nation from Dennis Kucinich to Barack Obama to Melissa Bean a fresh-faced dragon slayer who knocked off the veteran conservative U.S. Rep. Phil Crane of Wauconda northwest of Chicago. A Crane minion huffed that Bean was taking a \$2,000 contribution from “a communist.”

Weinstein abandoned communism for socialism in 1956. “This is not only not true but kind of ludicrous after 50 years,” he told the *Chicago Tribune*.



Jimmy in Mexico, 2004.

JER MASCHINOT

The prolific author was proudest of his final tome *The Long Detour*. But when it came to hardheaded pragmatism Weinstein never took the shortcut.

Laura Washington teaches journalism at DePaul University and is a columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times.

The Historian We Need

Early in the '70s I read a book by James Weinstein and my political outlook changed utterly and for good. Its title *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925* doesn't sound like a catalyst of hope and personal transformation. But the book was precisely what a recent refugee from the Weathermanic Cheadoring province of the New Left needed.

Radical democrats Jimmie revealed had for two delicious decades been a force to be reckoned with in American public life. From 1901 to 1920 there were 323 different Socialist newspapers with a combined readership in the millions. In hundreds of cities and towns the Socialist Party (SP) elected mayors councilmen and tax assessors. Theodore Roosevelt and William Jennings Bryan pilfered chunks of the SP's platform and such prominent thinkers as John Dewey W.E.B. DuBois and Walter Lippmann sang its praises. It was a revelation to learn that avowed Marxists had once gained a plurality of votes in such hamlets as St. Mary's Ohio and Grand Junction Colo. and that the *Rebel* published in the small town of Hallettsville Texas could sustain a weekly circulation of 25,000.



**Jimmy on the streets
of Manhattan,
c. 1968.**

COURTESY OF BETH MASCHINOT

Clearly, unlike the left that I knew, this was a movement rooted in the American heartland. Jimmy had set out to explain why, at the end of World War I, the Socialist Party entered a crisis from which it never recovered. But he sparked a new fascination with how the party had become the broadest, most popular organization of its kind in U.S. history.

Not that the causes of the SP's failure didn't matter. In Jimmy's sober view, it was the rise of Bolshevism that had split the radical movement in 1919 and then stymied the reconstruction of a mass party rooted in the concerns of ordinary Americans. Only an ex-Communist like he could truly grasp the fatal appeal of Lenin's worldview. Thus began the left's long, mostly fruitless romance with authoritarian revolutionaries who created a new order in which "freedom," "democracy," and "workers' power" blared from official banners but all but vanished as lived realities.

From that point on, Jimmy took on the mission of reviving the vision of Eugene V. Debs and his comrades. In two subsequent books and in the pages of *In These Times*, he labored to link the dream of a cooperative commonwealth with the exigencies of doing politics in the most thoroughly capitalist republic on earth. It was and remains a noble task, even if not enough Americans cared to listen.

But as a historian of and for the left, Jimmy pioneered in writing the kind of empathetic studies of common folk that

have transformed the field, even as our nation slid into the clutches of the Reagans and the Bushes. Henceforth, most scholars have rejected the kind of historians who, to quote Mr. Dooley—the fictional Irish-American bartender who delighted newspaper readers a century ago—are like some physicians who "are always lookin' f'r symptoms" and making "a post-mortem examination."

"It tells ye what a counthry died iv," commented Mr. Dooley. "But I'd like to know what it lived iv."

Thanks to Jimmy, we're still trying to figure that out.

Michael Kazin's biography of William Jennings Bryan will be published in January. He teaches history at Georgetown University.

Guts and Tenacity

A few months ago, I made—well, "a historical discovery" would be much too grand. But a discovery, of a kind. At any rate, the kind of documentary tidbit that is useful in trying to narrate the past.

I meant to draw Jimmy's attention to it, but never did. Now it's too late. Let it go here, then, as a belated footnote to his place in the history of the American left.

During the '70s, quite a few people in the United States wanted to build a new communist party. This time (they figured) they'd get things right. At least several thousand people were involved, and not all of them

were crazy. One of the groups consisted largely of graduate students in Tucson, Arizona. They based themselves, not just on Chairman Mao, but on the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser; and they brought out a journal called *Theoretical Review* that ran some original (indeed, pioneering) work on the history of the American left. They were also pretty smart about cultural matters—punk rock, for example. (That made a big impression on me at the time.)

Intelligent and serious as the Tucson crew were, they were blindsided by history. Sometime around 1980, they published an analysis of the situation facing American revolutionaries, and they noted, in particular, the danger coming from ... the reformism of Jimmy Weinstein and *In These Times*.

You can probably guess how this story turns out.

About 18 months into the first Reagan administration, whatever remained of the new communist movement—*Theoretical Review* included—pretty much vanished, like a bank of fog under the rays of the sun. ("Morning in America," indeed.)

Jimmy made his share of contributions at the intellectual level. He did work that stood the test of decades; some of it is, I think, of permanent importance. But for the left, smarts aren't enough. If it were, we'd have taken state power and established a democratic society by now. Guts and tenacity also count, and perhaps count more. Jimmy had them. We have his example. We are rich.

Scott McLemee, a former *In These Times* contributing editor, writes a bi-weekly column for *Inside Higher Education*.

Ambiguous Legacy

The biding theme in the books, articles and editorials of James Weinstein is the need for the American left to know and to act from an understanding of its own history. This notion is elaborated most fully in his five books—four of them published between 1967 and 1975, in the midst of the rise and decline of the optimistic and fatally flawed New Left. The left's failure was, as he wrote in *Ambiguous Legacy*, a destiny repeated three times by American radicals in the Twentieth Century, beginning with the decline of the American Socialist Party after World War I, the demise of the Communist Party in 1956 and the collapse of the New Left after 1968.