

Jaurès

Leon Trotsky

Over modern French politics two figures loom: Clemenceau and Jaurès. It would not be at all difficult to explain how Clemenceau found at the bottom of his journalist's inkwell the means which permitted him finally to rule the destiny of France. This 'uncompromising' radical, this awesome toppler of ministries turned out in practice to be the last political resort of the French bourgeoisie: he 'ennobled' the rule of the stock exchange with the banner and phraseology of radicalism. In this case everything is clear to the last degree.

But what about Jaurès? What allows him to occupy so many places in the political life of the republic? The strength of his party? Of course, Jaurès would be inconceivable outside of his party; however, one cannot escape the impression, particularly if one is casting a glance from Germany, that Jaurès' role outgrew the real strength of his party. How do we explain this? By the might of his very individuality? But although personal charm might quite satisfactorily explain events within the limits of the drawing-room or the boudoir, on the political arena the most 'titanic' personalities remain the executive organs of social forces.

The solution to the riddle of Jaurès' political role lies in the *revolutionary tradition*.

What is tradition? The question is not as simple as it at first seems. Where does it nest: in material institutions? In one's individual consciousness? At first glance it seems to be in both places. But on examination it turns out to be somewhere deeper: in the sphere of the unconscious.

During a given period revolutionary events gripped France, saturated her air with its ideas, named her streets with its names and imprinted its triple slogans on the walls of her public buildings, from the Panthéon to the convict prisons. But then events, through the furious play of their inner forces, revealed their entire content and the last wave rose up high and fell back: reaction became enthroned. With a

Trotsky published his assessment of the French Socialist leader, Jean Jaurès, in a journal produced in Kiev in 1909.

wicked indefatigability it exterminated all reminiscences of it from institutions, monuments, documents, from journalism, from everyday speech and what is even more striking, from social consciousness. Facts and names have been forgotten. Mysticism, eroticism and cynicism take the throne. Where are the revolutionary traditions? They have disappeared without trace ... But yet something imperceptible has happened, something has stirred, some unfamiliar draught has run through the atmosphere of France – the forgotten comes to life and the dead men rise up again. And traditions reveal all of their might. Where are they hiding? In the mysterious reservoirs of the unconscious somewhere at the extremities of the nerves that have undergone a historical processing which no decree can now repeal or abolish. Thus out of 1793 grew 1830, 1848 and 1871.

Imponderable and ethereal as these traditions are, they are however now becoming a real factor in politics for they are capable of becoming incarnate. Even in the worst days of its fallen spirit the French proletariat, torn to pieces in factions and sects, stood like a warning shadow over the official leaders of the fatherland. That is why the immediate political influence of the French workers has always been higher than their level of organization and their parliamentary representation. And it is in this historical force, which goes on from generation to generation, that Jaurès is strong.

But this Jaurès, the bearer of a heritage, is still not the whole Jaurès. He presents another side towards us, that of a parliamentarian of the Third Republic. A parliamentarian from top to toe! His world is that of the electoral pact, the parliamentary platform, the challenging question, the oratorical duel, the backstage agreement and, at times, the ambiguous compromise ... A compromise against which traditions and objectives alike – the past and the future – might be quick to protest. Where is the psychological knot which ties these two faces together?

'The practical man,' says Renan in his article on Cousin, 'has to be base. If he has lofty goals they will only mislead him. It is for this reason that great people take part in practical life only through their shortcomings and petty qualities.' In these words of a contemplative sceptic and spiritual Epicurean it is not hard to find the key to Jaurès contradictions: assuming that here we have not a malicious slander on man in general but on Jaurès in particular. All of life is practice, creation and doing. 'Lofty goals' cannot mislead for they are merely its organs, and practice will always maintain its supreme control over them. To say that practical man, i.e. *social man*, must be for the most part base means simply to expose one's own moral cynicism, to fear its practical conclusions and to immerse oneself in idealistic speculations.

Jaurès destroys Renan's slander on man by his whole moral stature. An impatient active idealism guides him in even his most foolhardy moves.

In the darkest days of Millerandism – 1902 – I had occasion to see Jaurès next to Millerand on the platform, hand in hand, apparently linked in a complete unity of aims and resource. But an unmistakable feeling told me that an unbridgeable abyss separated them: this extreme enthusiast, selfless and ardent, from that

parliamentary careerist, cold and calculating. There is something overwhelmingly convincing, a sort of infantile athletic sincerity in his figure, his voice and his gestures ...

On the platform he seems huge and yet he is below average height. Thick-set, with a head sitting squarely on his neck, with expressive ‘dancing’ cheekbones, nostrils which swell up as he speaks wholly releasing the stream of his passion, he in appearance too belongs to the same human type as Mirabeau and Danton. As an orator he is incomparable and has met no comparison. There is not that finished and at time irritating refinement in his speech with which Vandervelde shines. He cannot be compared with Bebel for a logical force of attraction. The cruel and venomous irony of Victor Adler is foreign to him. But in spirit, in passion and in his verve he is the equal of them all ...

It is true that another thoroughbred Russian discovered in Jaurès merely a skilful technical erudition and pseudo-classical declamation. But what speaks in such an appraisal is nothing more than the poverty of our native culture. The French have an oratorical technique, a common heritage which they adopt without effort, and outside of which they are as inconceivable as a ‘respectable’ man without formal dress. Every speaking Frenchman speaks well. Hence the harder it is for a Frenchman to be a great orator. But Jaurès was just such. It is not his rich technique nor his enormous miraculous sounding voice nor the generous profuseness of his gestures but the *genius’s naïveté of his enthusiasm* which brings Jaurès close to the masses and makes him what he is ...

But we have digressed from our question: what is the psychological knot which ties up in Jaurès an inheritor of Promethean traditions with a parliamentary operator?

What is Jaurès? An opportunist? Or a revolutionary? Both the one and the other depending on the political moment; and moreover he is ready to go to the ultimate extremes in either direction. Jaurès is a figure of *action*. He is always prepared to ‘crown the thought with the crown of execution’ ... During the Dreyfus Case Jaurès said to himself: ‘whoever does not seize the executioner’s hand poised over his victim will himself become the executioner’s accomplice’, and without pondering the political outcome of the campaign he threw himself into the flood of Dreyfusism. His teacher, friend and subsequent irreconcilable antagonist, Guesde, told him: ‘Jaurès, I like you because your deed always follows on your thought!’

Herein lies the strength and the weakness of Jaurès.

‘Any age believes,’ wrote Heine, ‘that its own struggle is more important than that of all the rest. It is in this that the faith of an age consists and it is in this faith that it lives and dies ...’

In Jaurès there is something beyond this religion of his age: he has the élan of the *moment*. He does not measure the transient political alignments against the great yardstick of historical perspectives. He is wholly and completely here amid the evil of the hour. And in serving the hour he is not afraid of coming into conflict with his higher aim. He expends his passion, energy and talent with such a

spontaneous extravagance as if the outcome of the great struggle of the two worlds depended on each political question taken one by one.

In this strength of Jaurès lies, too, his fatal weakness. His politics lack proportion and frequently he cannot see the wood for the trees.

*There is a tide in the affairs of men (says Shakespeare's Brutus)
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.*

In the mould and the scale of his character Jaurès was born for the epoch of the great flood. But he was fated to develop his talent in the period of grave European reaction. This is not his fault but his misfortune. But this misfortune in turn engendered his fault. Among his gifts Jaurès lacks one: the ability to *wait*. Not to wait sitting idly by, but to gather one's forces and prepare the tackle confidently reckoning on the approaching tempest. He wants immediately to switch over to the jangling coinage of practical success, to the great traditions and the great opportunities. From there he falls so often into insoluble contradictions 'in shallows and in miseries' of the Third Republic ...

Only a blind man would number Jaurès among the doctrinaires of political compromise. To such politics he has merely added his talents, his passion and his ability to go through to the end but he has not made a catechism out of it. And in the event Jaurès will be the first to unfurl his mainsail and move off the shallows out to the open sea ...