

*Navigating the Zeitgeist: A Story of the Cold War, the New Left, Irish Republicanism, and International Communism*, by Helena Sheehan. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019. \$95.00; paper, \$20.00. Pp. 308.

This is a remarkable political autobiography: of an academic, now Professor Emerita of Philosophy at Dublin City University in Ireland, who nevertheless, in both achievement and self-conception, has always been more than “just” an academic.

Helena Sheehan grew up in an Irish Catholic working-class family in Philadelphia in the 1950s. She had an unusual internal spark of inquiry and deep reflection from early on, which led her into Catholicism and initiation into a convent at a young age (a later retelling by her of this period is entitled “Portrait of the Marxist as a Young Nun”). The same spark led her out of the convent a few years later, and into the New Left (in a chapter called “The Times They Are A-Changin’”; the chapter titles are all songs), where she managed to achieve an impressive unity of theory and practice, and live a life that truly brought together the political and the personal — something some of us in that generation talked about but failed to actually achieve.

In 1972 Sheehan, following her own cultural roots, decamped for Ireland, where she quickly became politically and personally involved with the IRA and Sinn Fein. The chapter describing this phase of her journey (“Four Green Fields”) captures her perilous traverse of the boundary between legality and illegality: fund-raising events, for example, ranged from folk concerts to bank robberies. Through the furious intermingling of ideologies, with elements of ethnic mysticism, nationalism, feminism, and (of course) Irish republicanism, Sheehan struggled with the need to sort out basic principles, and avoid the enormous pressure to pursue one strand of a complex unity at the expense of others.

In this movement, I became a Marxist. . . . the effect was electric. All that I had been struggling to synthesize suddenly clicked into place. . . . With a newly firm grip on the broad outlines of economics, science, and technology I began to also comprehend philosophy, politics, sociology, history and literature more clearly, finally seeing them in the fullness of their interconnections. (175.)

She describes her striving for (what might be called) *theoretical common sense*: a search for dialectical synthesis — of nature and society, causality and human will, determinacy and contingency. This was a central theme in her 1985 book, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History* (reviewed in S&S, Fall 1985). In this period she also pursued her doctorate in Dublin (Trinity and University Colleges), and this led eventually to faculty positions at Dublin City University, teaching history of ideas and media studies.

In 1975, Sheehan joined the Communist Party of Ireland (chapter 6: “The Internationale”). From there it was a sure link to the Communist Party of Great Britain, and then to the CPSU, the CPs of Eastern Europe, and the world. Having known quite well the shibboleths of New Left thinking in the USA — the cult of spontaneity, the excesses of “prefigurative politics,” the “the personal is political” slogan used to the extent of denying all distinction between these two levels of existence — she now encountered a new set of challenges. At the CPI Party School, for example, lectures “often tended to be formulaic, even catechetical. . . . There was a correct answer to every question. In fact, the questions had disappeared. This produced a certain type who was exceedingly smug about having the right answers to questions they had never really asked” (199). Sheehan’s persistent questioning led her to participation in conferences and classes at the Communist University of London, and then the International Lenin School in Moscow, in 1976. In all of these venues, and others, she made deep connections and lasting friendships, and also ruffled quite a few feathers with her honest and irrepressible inquiries into weaknesses, and worse. She writes: “My immersion in the communist movement, not only my activity in its present, but my research into its past, was posing the question of ends and means in ever sharper terms” (198).

Things came to a head when Sheehan was asked to contribute a chapter to an edited book, *Dialectical Materialism and Modern Science*, which was being produced under the auspices of the *World Marxist Review* in Prague. The book was to be published in Russian, Czech, and other languages simultaneously. To make a long story short (but read the long version in the book itself), Sheehan’s chapter was found to contain “errors that would have to be corrected,” “ideological distortions,” etc. (230). A revised text of the Russian version “bore little resemblance” to the original, and much painful back-and-forth resulted. Later, at a conference in Dusseldorf in 1978, Sheehan confronted one of the Soviet editors, Ivan Frolov, about the alien chapter that had been published and attributed to her. The incident, never satisfactorily resolved, illustrates one dimension of problems Sheehan encountered while dealing with bureaucratic and heavy-handed Soviet and East European academics and politicians.

The book ends with the 1980s, in a chapter (“So Strong”) in which Sheehan finally gets her PhD and settles into something like a normal academic career, while maintaining contacts with intriguing thinkers and doers, East and West. She had left the CPI in 1979. The book ends, as it had to, on a note of uncertainty: “Another mighty wave was already rising and it felt as if it could engulf us” (308).

Sheehan at times loses herself in this narrative; names, acronyms and technical terms proliferate, and the reader wishes for an index. But these

are minor quibbles. Her basic integrity and synthesizing focus continue to shine forth, and one hopes that progressive humanity will reward her before too long with a sense that her quest for rounded theoretical understanding, embrace of uncertainty at the edges of core beliefs, and insistence on the unity of scientific pursuits and moral commitments will have been vindicated.

I will end with an observation about the blurb that adorns the front cover of the book, by Mike Davis: “An uncompromisingly honest and utterly fascinating memoir from the drowned continent that was once western communism.” Apart from the fact that the book is about the U. S. New Left, the Irish republican left, and communism across Europe (West *and* East), and not “western communism,” this little “drowned continent” zinger smacks of exactly the sort of cold-war hyperbole that Sheehan is at pains to reject, and one must wonder why the publisher used it. Here is Sheehan’s own much more nuanced and thoughtful summation:

It was a story with a dark side as well as a bright one, and I made every effort to see both in proper perspective. . . . On the one side, there was a Marxist history of Marxism, which told only of the bright side, and which was distorted by empty jargon, hollow self-praise, coy evasion, or outright deceit. On the other side, there was an anti-Marxist history of Marxism, which told only of the dark side, which was equally distorted by divorcing events, ideas and people from their proper context. . . . I could take no joy in the self-inflicted tragedies of the communist movement, as did anti-communist writers. . . . (246.)

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*Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, edited by David Chandler and Christian Fuchs. London: University of Westminster Press, 2019. €20.99. Pp. 248.

This volume’s depiction of the modern era is an eye-opening study and critique of the age of Big Data capitalism, after a cultural shift toward high technology said to have thoroughly changed our political prospects. Digital optimists declare that we have acquired “digital” imaginations: we now have