

# Max Nomad and Waclaw Machajski

Edmund Wilson

October 15, 1960

The specialist in revolutionary history who writes under the name of Max Nomad has published a new and important book called *Aspects of Revolt*. Max Nomad, whose first book, *Rebels and Renegades*, appeared in 1932, has occupied a unique position in the intellectual world of New York. Though working exclusively in the field of reformist and radical politics, he has had no affiliation, during this period of literary activity, with any political party, nor has he written to promote any cause. He has been critical of the leaders of all the movements, and this has not made him popular with the Left. Far from sharing utopian illusions, he is skeptical alike of the capacity of the masses to improve their own condition and of the capacity for sustained disinterestedness of those who claim to represent them. What, then, is the fascination that revolution exerts for Max Nomad? What has made him a connoisseur of radicals? In order to understand his point of view, you must know that he was born in Eastern Galicia and educated mostly in Vienna, and that, as he tells us in the preface to this latest book, he was "a Socialist in my high-school days, an Anarchist as a college student, a Syndicalist *sui generis* during the years of my romantic and not-so-romantic vagabondage, and finally a Soviet sympathizer some forty years ago when Lenin and Trotsky were still glorious legends, between 1917 and 1920." But at some point—what was cardinal for his thinking—he came under the influence of Waclaw Machajski, an heretical Polish radical whose ideas are calculated to eat away the convictions of any school that has pretended to have for its object the establishment of a Socialist state which will realize a dream of equality.

Waclaw Machajski (pronounced "Vátzlav Makhighski") who was born in Russian Poland, began as a Polish nationalist and then became a revolutionary Marxist. When Machajski was twenty-six years old, in 1892, he made an attempt to smuggle into Poland a provocative manifesto, prepared by Polish and Russian students in Switzerland, that was intended to support a rebellion of the factory workers of Lodz. He was caught and sent to Siberia, where he spent eight years in the extreme north-east, on the edge of the Arctic Circle. He had, however, as was possible in those days, when the censorship was easy to evade, an excellent opportunity to acquaint himself with Socialist literature, and this literature had upon Machajski an entirely unintended effect. It led him to certain conclusions quite contrary to Socialist theory which he expounded first, while still in Siberia, in a small treatise called *The Evolution of Social Democracy*, published under a pseudonym and circulated illegally. This he later, after leaving Russia, incorporated in a larger work, called *The Intellectual Worker*, which was printed in Russian in Geneva.

The most important feature of the theory of politics which Machajski propounded in these writings was the discovery that the Socialists, who had put themselves forward as the spokesmen and agents of the working class, in reality belonged already, without their being aware of it, to a class of an entirely new kind, whose interests they would eventually defend at the expense of the interests of the manual workers. This class was composed of technicians, intellectuals, professional men, and middle-class clerks and officials who had had a good education. It was a group that had enormously increased in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it had now become impossible for its members to depend, as they had formerly done, on aristocratic or royal patronage. They did not recognize themselves as a class, but, conscious that their value to society was increasing in proportion to the decline of the feudal regime, they felt also the impulse to power, and they reached out—having no other possible allies against the remnants of the old society and the strong and commercial bourgeoisie—for the support of the working class. In the case of the Socialist parties in the countries west of Tsarist Russia, Machajski decided that, no matter how Marxist they pretended to be in their objectives, they were not moved by any real intention of overthrowing the capitalist system: they merely wanted to have a share in directing it; and as for Russia itself, when its rebels should have got rid of absolutism, they would eventually behave in the same way. These reformers did not really aim at what they called the "classless society" which was just as much "pie in the sky" as their American Socialist successors were to call the rewards of religion. It was a lure to win adherents from the working class. Their true unavowed aim was gradually to supplant the private capitalists, and for this they needed first not violence but democratic process of government, which would enable them to get into office, and then government ownership of industries, which would make them the supreme masters. They would absorb certain former capitalists and certain able self-educated workers, and they would function as an administrative hierarchy, with larger salaries than the working class, and in consequence wider freedom and superior education. They would soon forget the interests of the working class when its help was no longer needed.

Now, this theory of Machajski's falls in with a number of striking predictions—inspired by hopes or by fears—that had already been made up by others. One remembers the ideal of Comte de Saint-Simon, who, in the early years of the nineteenth century, proposed a great "Council of Newton"—since he believed that it was Newton who had been chosen by God to convey the divine revelations—to be composed exclusively of scientists, writers, composers and painters, which was to organize and run society in accordance with social laws corresponding to the physical ones that governed the heavenly bodies; and one remembers that the followers of Saint-Simon emphatically disavowed any interest in promoting equality among the properly unequal grades of men. It is significant in this connection that the last leader of the Saint-Simonist movement should have begun as an engineer and ended as a railroad director. And Max Nomad quotes some other prophecies by political thinkers that point in the same direction. The Anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin, in 1873, predicted that the Marxist state, if it ever came into existence, would be dominated by a "privileged minority... That minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps of former workers. And these, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people, will cease to be workers and will look upon the entire world of manual workers from the heights of the State. They will no longer represent the people, but themselves and their own pretensions to rule the people... They will establish a single State Bank that will concentrate in its hands all commercial-industrial, agricultural and even scientific production; and the mass of the people will be divided into two armies, the industrial and the agricultural, which will be un-

der the direct command of government engineers who will constitute a new privileged scientific political class.” Herbert Spencer in 1884, in his *Man Versus the State*, said that “the machinery of Communism, like existing social machinery, has to be framed out of existing human nature; and the defects of existing human nature will generate in the one the same evils as in the other. The love of power, the selfishness, the injustice, the untruthfulness, which often in comparatively short times bring private organizations to disaster, will inevitably, where their effects accumulate from generation to generation, work evils far greater and less remediable; since, vast and complex and possessed of all the resources, the administrative organization, once developed and consolidated, must become irresistible... It would need but a war with an adjacent society, or some internal discontent demanding forcible suppression, to at once transform a socialistic administration into a grinding tyranny like that of ancient Peru, under which the mass of the people, controlled by grades of officials, and leading lives that were inspected out-of-doors and indoors, labored for the support of the organization which regulated them, and were left with but a bare subsistence for themselves.” Max Nomad might also have cited Flaubert’s prophetic creation, in his *L’éducation Sentimentale*, of Sénécal, the mathematics teacher, who is first an intransigent Socialist, then a merciless factory foreman, then a policeman putting down the workers in the revolution of 1848. Thorstein Veblen, who was not intransigent but who made certain radical criticisms of the American economic system, departed from controversial theory by arguing, in *The Engineers and the Price System*—the book that gave rise to the Technocracy movement—that if any sort of Socialistic society was ever to be realized in the United States, the transformation would have to be effected not by the working class but by the concerted action of the engineers. The cold contempt of Marx and Engels for most of their working-class collaborators, although this was not shared by Lenin, set an example to the later leaders of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, who have confirmed the worst apprehensions of Bakunin and Herbert Spencer. The forecasts of James Burnham’s book *The Managerial Revolution* are in process of being confirmed by the tightening grip on the United States of the armed forces, the engineers (the Corps of Engineers is of course itself a part of the Army), and a host of professional bureaucrats, often the products of our “schools of administration,” who are rapidly and alarmingly getting into their hands more and more of the business of the government, the foundations, the universities and the various public institutions—to which group, as Max Nomad points out, the officials of the labor unions also belong.

In regard to the fundamental principle involved in these recurrent phenomena, so subversive of Socialist assumptions, Machajski was certainly right. There is a category of class here implied that has never been recognized in quite the same way by the analysts of “class structure.” Mussolini and the Russian Communists and the bureaucrats of the Pentagon Building, though they speak in different-sounding dialects, wear uniforms of different design and mutually denounce one another, do undoubtedly have nevertheless a professional managerial interest in common. But Machajski’s announcement of this law by which the managers and intellectuals first enlist the support of the manual workers and then drop them to consolidate their own position did not, as one might have expected, put an end to his radical activities. If the leaders of the Socialist sects had invariably, in the past, let the workers down, he himself would prove an exception by continuing to defend their interests; he would stick by them to the end. He would not only fight to increase their wages but would insist, after the advent of the bureaucratic state on reducing its managers’ salaries to a parity with the workers’ augmented pay. But how was this to be accomplished? By a revolutionary dictatorship—for it was figuratively in very small type that Machajski admitted

this. He spoke of it in print only once, and his followers mistakenly assumed that he had later abandoned this idea. In his post-Siberian phase, he never mentioned the seizure of power but spoke exclusively of the strategy of strikes as a way of enforcing the worker's demands. But even though he does not go further than the pressure to be brought to bear by striking, there is implied here, as Max Nomad says, a serious inconsistency with Machajski's general thesis. For would not the end result of the policy of continual strikes be not merely equalization of income but also nationalization of industry? The employers could not be expected to consent to reduce their own incomes to the level of the manual workers, and if they declared a general lockout, the government would have to take over. If the educated followers of Machajski then took over the government, they would soon become a specialized group and would award themselves special privileges. When Machajski's disciples asked him why they themselves, not coming from the laboring class, were working against their own class interests, he would answer that they were working in the interests of their "revolutionary career"—that is, they were the only revolutionists who would be able to sustain their loyalty to the working class and who would thus affect a true revolution. When they asked him how, assuming their eventual success, it would be possible for the uneducated workers not to continue to be deceived by the educated people who governed them, he would answer that the means of deception would by that time have become exhausted.

Machajski and his Russian followers, who called themselves the Workers' Conspiracy, took a small but active part in the 1905 revolution, concentrating on public works for the relief for the unemployed, rather than on the struggle for political democracy. But the group was broken up by arrests, and Machajski again went abroad. He was able to come back to Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution and to publish one issue of a paper called *Worker's Revolution*, in which he warned the industrial workers who were supposedly now the masters of Russia that it was really the intelligentsia who would rule *them* through their worker's deputies. He told them that they must equalize incomes (which, consistently with the teaching of Marx, had never been an aim of the Soviets), otherwise they would never be allowed to have access to the higher grades of education. "When the working class strives for rule, it means that it strives for revolutionary domination *over* the government. Through its revolutionary pressure, through the expression of the will of the toiling millions, the working class ought to dictate the law to the government." But how was this to rescue the situation from Machajski's own vicious circle? Nobody, in any case, paid much attention. Some of his followers had joined the Bolsheviks. But, later on, the predictions of Machajski began to trouble the minds of the manipulators of the Soviet ideology. In the twenties, they went so far as to prohibit the republication of Machajski's books and pamphlets which had been written in Siberia and Switzerland twenty years before, and the more the Soviet society came to justify Machajski's thesis by producing a privileged officialdom that coerced and harassed the "peasants and workers," the more savage against him this officialdom became. Trotsky made a point of attacking him, because almost to the end, in exile, he persisted in denying that the Soviet bureaucracy was really an exploiting class. When Machajski died, in 1926, *Pravda* printed four columns of denunciation, and twelve years later, at the time of the purges, when the bureaucracy had become a despotism, it devoted six columns to him. These blasts, says Max Nomad, must have seemed to it the only revenge it could take. He was dead, and no doubt his few followers had either also died or left Russia, so they could not be made to confess that they were counter-revolutionary Trotskyists in the service of Wall Street and Hitler.

The story of Waclaw Machajski is told in Max Nomad's new book, and he is present in all its thinking, as he has been in that of Nomad's earlier works. Max Nomad is to this extent a loyal

disciple: that he still stands up for "the masses" and believes that their condition has been actually improved by the struggle of organized labor, though—with the exception of "a few pure idealists"—their leaders continue to behave in the way Machajski said they would. As we have seen, he shows Machajski's inconsistencies, but he also elaborates Machajski's themes and supplements Machajski's findings with a good deal of new material derived from his own research and observation.

One of the chapters of *Aspects of Revolt, The Elusive Ideal*, discusses equality of income and seeks to show that it can never be realized, since there must always, at the outset of any society that is aiming to establish Socialism—as Marx was forced to admit and as the Soviet Union has demonstrated—be categories of public servants who need to live in greater comfort and who may claim for themselves higher incomes than the citizens on lower levels of culture and responsibility. These begin with a great advantage over the general run of the population because they are better educated. Now, suppose that, by some miracle of disinterestedness, these exceptionally well-equipped officials make an attempt to give everybody else the benefit of a training equal to theirs. Long before the general level has been raised to the point at which the former illiterates have shown themselves capable of this higher education, the program to improve them will inevitably have lapsed; the official technicians and managers will so have consolidated their group position that they will have made such higher training their monopoly. This happened in the Soviet Union, where at first the children of the Red Army officers and of the other upper strata were sent to superior schools; but this grading of education is now said to have been abolished or disguised. In any case, the student who could qualify for higher education must be sound in his attitude toward the Soviet State and may be expected, if able enough, to take his place in its upper ranks; and something of the kind must also have happened in the case of the families of our union officials, who can afford to send their children to better schools than are possible for the ordinary members. Differences in education will be always, says Max Nomad, unavoidable, and they will always make equality impossible. Another chapter, *Why and How They Changed*, presents a whole parade of cases of Left statesmen and labor leaders—Weitling, Lassalle, Clemenceau, Briand, Pilsudski, Ramsay MacDonald, Mussolini—who illustrate Machajski's thesis in a variety of ways. We learn that even Norman Thomas, who has been surely one of the most steadfast of Socialist leaders, has finally been brought to the conclusion that "the messianic hope which consciously or unconsciously inspired most of us to become Socialists is scarcely tenable in America or elsewhere in the world... History and our better knowledge of our Human psychology have destroyed or profoundly altered that particular scheme of earthly salvation. We have learned much about the temptations of power, and we know that there is no messianic working class nor any sort of élite that we can trust automatically to save 'mankind'."

Another chapter, *The Pedestal*—particularly dampening—consists of examples of the recurrent stupidity of the uninstructed masses in voting against their own interests: "the docility," for example, "of the millions of American organised workers who, save in the case of almost monumental scandals, permanently reëlect their dictatorial rulers, even if—not satisfied with their fabulous salaries—they are disposing of the union treasuries and welfare funds as if they were their own property"; the action of the British lower classes, after the victory of the Labour Party in 1945, in subsequently restoring the Conservatives, for the reason, according to Nomad, that they believed themselves to have risen to the middle class and now owe it their class allegiance; and the voting out of office by the Milwaukee electorate of their Socialist municipal government, after what Mr. Nomad says was "an unimpeachable twenty-four year record of graftless administration," under

the influence of "a young and charming demagogue whose only plank was 'Clean out City Hall and oust the Socialists.'"

Has Max Nomad perhaps himself been a little inconsistent here? Might not this administration, in its twenty-four years of office, already, in conformity with Machajski's law, have been alienating itself from its constituents, so that these latter were correct in repudiating it? And what about the British Labour government in the country in all the world in which Sorel's law of "social capillarity" is supposed to operate most rapidly? There is also an amusing chapter, *Dead Dogs and Holy Falsehoods*, which discusses the uses of slander in the revolutionary struggle for power, from John Quincy Adams's description of Jefferson as "double-dealing, treacherous, and false beyond all toleration," though Marx's nasty attack on Bakunin for the purpose of getting him out of the First International, to *Pravda's* characterization of Gandhi as "a flunky of British imperialism." But this kind of slander is by no means confined to politics of revolution. What about Lyndon Johnson on Kennedy just before the latter's nomination? What about Kennedy on Nixon just afterwards?

One gets a distinct impression that Max Nomad keeps a filing case in which he puts away, as he happens on them, examples of the various types of paradox involved in Left Wing politics—which paradoxes themselves form a kind of collection. Thus in chapters such as the two last mentioned here are moments when *Aspects of Revolt* seems a little like a mere cabinet of curiosities of revolutionary behavior. There are also a chapter on *Bandits with a Philosophy*—Pancho Villa, the American Anarchists, the Bolshevik "expropriators," of whom Stalin was one and at whose "expropriations" Lenin winked—and another on *Angry Amazons*—Frances Wright, the early nineteenth-century social reformer; Sofia Perovskaya, who assassinated Alexander II; Emma Goldman, the Anarchist, Rosa Luxemburg, the independent Marxist; whom Max Nomad seems to feel that they cannot be assigned to the same category as his masculine figures and whose careers he makes little attempt to analyze in the Machajskian terms. Yet *Aspects of Revolt* is an effort in the direction of an "anatomy" of revolution. It is, so far, Nomad's best book, and one stops oneself from saying what a pity it is that it was not written earlier, because when one compares it with his earlier books—*Rebels and Renegades* of 1932, and *Apostles of Revolution* of 1939—one sees that before the last war Max Nomad, though quite non-utopian, had still retained a little more of his original radical faith. At the end of the second of these, he expresses the hope that "out of this bloody welter may emerge a European Union of Democratic Socialist Republics, equally remote from the jungle of capitalist chaos and from the graveyard of Fascist or 'Communist' totalitarianism. For all its economic inequalities, for all its never-ending class struggles between the higher and the lower income groups, such a Union would point the way toward a new civilization. A civilization combining the security of a planned socialized economy with that freedom of expression which is the only guarantee of progress."

A new phase for Max Nomad had, one sees, begun when, in 1953, he published his *A Skeptic's Political Dictionary and Handbook for the Disenchanted*. This mordant and amusing volume is described by the author in a foreword as a work of "melancholy radicalism." "My own modest ambition," he concludes, "is merely to help those few decent people, in the words of Chamfort, who may be hiding somewhere, to see clearly through the political double talk of yesterday, today, and the threatening tomorrow." Here is his definition of "Communist": "1. A man not to be judged hastily. He may turn out to be a stoolpigeon for the F.B.I. rather than a spy for the M.V.D. 2. One who believes that political liberty, though granted by non-Communists to Communists, should not be granted by Communists to non-Communists. 3. One who believes that a full dinnerpail is

better than the right of free speech, and that therefore those who get impatient about the absence of the former under 'Communism' should be deprived of the right to complain about it." And here is his definition of "American Democracy": "A system under which the voters invariably elect the candidates presented to them by the political machines of one of the two big office-holders' and office-seeker's trusts. The result is a government of the people, by the people, for the people, carried on by politicians and office-holders in partnership with those owning the wealth of the country and holding it in trust for the people."

But he has not allowed himself to become a cynic. In the preface to *Aspects of Revolt*, which is, I suppose, his real testament, "I have no use," he says, "for those snobs, whether Nietzscheans or plain Babbitts, who look down with contempt upon the crowd; yet I cannot help realizing that the masses are hopelessly benighted and gullible, ready to submit to any form of servitude, either sanctified by tradition or ushered in by demagogues and adventurers after the long overdue collapse of the old regime." And the book, although also "disenchanted," is the most impressive example he has given us of his good will and his fundamental humanity as well as his immense multilingual learning and his inquiring comprehensive intelligence.

In the last chapter of *Aspects of Revolt*—called *Changeless America?*—Nomad speculates on the future of the United States. "The indifference," he says, "of the American workers toward anti-capitalist ideas has given America the unique status of a country which, for all its anti-Communist hysteria, is not threatened by either Socialism or Communism." But suppose automation and mechanical brains result in violence of the characteristically American kind? Might not this rebellion necessitate the organization of "a super-New Deal that would combine the advantages of the Welfare State with those of a semi-socialized economy and full employment—while maintaining the traditional vocabulary of 'free enterprise,' dear to rich and poor alike in the United States, and are the myths of monarchy, pseudo-democracy, Socialism, Communism, and Fascism to the illusion-hungry denizens of other sections of the globe?" Or might not "an overproduction of the technical intelligentsia" result in the engineers' strike that Thorstein Veblen thought a possibility and the assumption by the engineers of the direction of American industry? "All this," Max Nomad concludes, "may or may not happen in the more or less distant future. However, for the time being it looks as if the comforts and benefits enjoyed by the great majority of those who in other countries are included among the underprivileged were a guarantee against any attempt—peaceful or violent—at a thoroughgoing change in the American way of life, all its injustices, inequalities and prejudices notwithstanding." But "the center of gravity," he thinks, may "shift from the big shareholders to the engineers, the economists and the intellectual workers in general, whom the other sections of the population may have to restrain from becoming all too powerful."

The last time I saw Max Nomad was some years ago in Webster Hall, at a debate between Peter Viereck and Corliss Lamont, with Norman Thomas presiding. He was sitting in the first row of the balcony, regarding the speakers with the round dark eyes that combine a certain irony with blandness, and I wondered what had brought him out. Norman Thomas and Corliss Lamont were perfectly familiar to him; he must have known exactly what they would say; and I decided that it was the neo-conservatism of the Metternich-admiring Viereck which had piqued the curiosity of this expert. When I greeted him after it was over, he said nothing about the debate but simply raised his eyebrows and smiled—the equivalent of a gentle shrug.

October 15, 1960





The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Edmund Wilson  
Max Nomad and Waclaw Machajski  
October 15, 1960

*The Bit Between My Teeth: A Literary Chronicle of 1950–1965*, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**