

## Arno J. Mayer as Historian: The "Mayerean Creed" Analyzed

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### *The New History and The "Mayerean Creed"*

In September 1904, Woodrow Wilson travelled to St. Louis, Missouri to deliver a speech at the Congress of Arts and Science, which had been scheduled to coincide with the Universal Expedition. Wilson chose to reflect upon the nature of history. In the course of his lecture, the president of Princeton University elaborated a definition of the task of the historian which indicated his kinship with the great American scholars of his era, Charles A. Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, Carl L. Becker, and Thorstein Veblen, the founders of the New History:

"[In the New History] . . . interest centers not so much in what happened as in what underlay the happening; not so much in the tides as in the silent forces that lifted them. . . . The instinct of the time is social rather than political. We would know not merely how law and government proceed but also how society breeds its forces, how these play upon the individual, and how the individual effects them."<sup>1</sup>

Arno J. Mayer, a professor of history at Princeton University for the past fourteen years, stands foursquare in the tradition of the New History as Woodrow Wilson described it. Not a prolific writer but an exhaustive one, Mayer's three books and several articles delve below the level of traditional political and diplomatic history to seek out the interaction of social forces underlying events. As is often typical of scholars blazing trails in unorthodox ways, Mayer is usually disdainful of traditional historical interpretations and his own conclusions tend to assume extreme and challenging forms. Needless to say, his work provokes controversy, but Mayer also contributes to our understanding of history, often in spite of

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himself, when he remains faithful to the writing of history and avoids conceptualization.

Mayer's three books exhibit an evolutionary pattern by which one can trace the development of his viewpoint on modern European history from seminal investigation to mature theory. The first of the three monographs is the *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917-1918* (later entitled *Wilson vs. Lenin: The Political Origins of the New Diplomacy* to identify the central theme more directly), published in 1959. Although not formally indicated as such, his second book, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (1967) is really volume two of a detailed and wide-ranging study of European politics and diplomacy which begins with *Wilson vs. Lenin*. The third book, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytic Framework* (1971) allegedly resulted from a paper Mayer prepared to clarify the meaning of counterrevolution in the subtitle of his second monograph. But more than this, *Dynamics* is Mayer's historical testament to date, the one piece of writing which fully develops the implicit themes of his earlier two volumes into an "analytic framework" for understanding recent European history. *Dynamics* contains his "creed" and as such it deserves to receive the fullest attention in any attempt to arrive at an understanding of Arno J. Mayer, the historian.

Four themes tie Mayer's three treatises together. First is the assertion of the primacy of the communist revolution as the standard of measure for the past century, or more specifically, the period from 1870-1956. Just as Europe and the world once measured itself against the meterstick of the French Revolution, so now should be recognized the challenge of the communist revolutions, first in Russia and subsequently in China.<sup>2</sup> The title *Wilson vs. Lenin*, and the words containment and counterrevolution which appear in the subtitle of Mayer's second book, testify to the central position which he accords the Bolshevik Revolution in the events he describes in his first two books. A second theme is that of the confrontation between the forces or parties of movement, associated with the Left, revolutionary tradition, and the forces or parties of order, the traditional

governing elites on the Right which draw their support from the so-called crisis strata of society, the "losers" who are threatened by, and resent, change. According to Mayer, a constant state of civil war exists between these two broad parties, fuelled by the interplay of social forces behind the tides of events. For example, the New Diplomacy, according to Mayer, originates from the struggle between the Right and the Left over war aims in the major combatant countries of World War I.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the forces of order and movement encounter each other both in the domestic and international arenas, and one must consider the relationship between these two levels. Wilson's Fourteen Points loom as an attempt to outbid Lenin for leadership over the forces of movement in Europe. The containment of Bolshevism by means of the Allied intervention in Russia and the creation of the *cordon sanitaire*; the snuffing out of revolutionary sparks in Central and Eastern Europe, followed by the ruthless White terror; the imposition of a Carthaginian peace on Germany; all these events are considered by Mayer to be, simultaneously, campaigns waged in the international civil war against revolution, and tactical maneuvers designed to undermine the domestic strength of the Left.

The final component of Mayer's creed is the belief that a conspiracy of silence has shrouded the study of the machinations of counterrevolution in the period 1870 to 1956. In *Dynamics of Counterrevolution*, he insists that "excessive preoccupation with . . . [the] . . . revolutionary aspects [of crisis situations] has contributed to the relative neglect of their equally essential and dialectically linked counterrevolutionary facets."<sup>4</sup> Mayer courageously assumes the mantle of St. George to seek out the twentieth century dragon of counterrevolution: "The time has come to face up to the scholarly and political obligation to clarify the counterrevolutionary realities of contemporary history."<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Mayer's quest is more reminiscent of Don Quixote tilting windmills.

### *Giants or Windmills?*

Mayer isolates and labels the period 1870 to 1956 as the era of the communist revolution. He defines revolution as "a violent,

fundamental, and abrupt change of incumbent elites, status and class relations, institutions, values, symbols, and myths," carried out by a leadership devoted to innovative change.<sup>6</sup> However, only leftist or communist leadership cadres are considered to be forward looking and committed to progressive change. This built-in bias makes revolution something more than is implied in the more value-free definition of it as a sudden and drastic, although not necessarily permanent, change in people's lives. Mayer neatly ordains the communist style of revolution as prototypical, automatically excluding every other movement of the past century which does not fit into his category. All revolutions in the communist era share a particular set of objectives, methods and results, and all are identified with the Left.

Given Mayer's concept of revolution, counterrevolution becomes a loaded term because as one reviewer expressed it, it "envisages no commitment to an alternative revolution but, rather, opposition to the only possible one," the communist revolution.<sup>7</sup> The possibility that Italian Fascists, for instance, counterrevolutionaries by Mayer's definition, might have opposed a Bolshevik style revolution in the short term in the name of a different, more appropriate one for the Italian context, is ruled out. Mayer himself is uncomfortable with the fact that fascist movements seem to be something new. After all, the fascists preferred to found their own movements rather than join conservative or reactionary parties, but he tries to explain away modern counterrevolutionaries as old wine in new skins.

In *Dynamics of Counterrevolution*, Mayer divides the forces of order into three parts: conservatives, reactionaries, and counterrevolutionaries. Conservatives wish to preserve the status quo: "Conservative thought is in the nature of an articulated refutation, not of creative innovation. It is designed to give coherence to the defense of *traditional* social, economic, and political institutions and of *traditional* aesthetics, morals and manners."<sup>8</sup> Reactionaries, on the other hand, reject the world around them and seek to turn back the clock: "Reactionaries advocate a return to a mythical and romanticized past. In this past they seek the recovery and restoration of institutions . . . which sustain a hierarchical order of privileges and prerogatives and

which also form a rampart against the corrosive leveling of polity, society, and culture." <sup>9</sup>

For Mayer, reactionaries and conservatives are mere antirevolutionaries, unable to articulate an effective mass-based substitute for the communist appeal. Counterrevolution, too, is the "clarion call for order, hierarchy, authority, discipline, obedience, tradition, loyalty, courage, sacrifice, and nationalism." <sup>10</sup> Counterrevolutionaries however, adopt revolutionary tactics. First, "by mobilizing and regimenting superannuated, unhinged and inert individuals and groups, counterrevolutionary leaders build the basis of power that enables them to become a new [already Mayer is blurring his categories] but claimant *political* counterelite." <sup>11</sup> Secondly, they create an ideology by "combining the glorification of traditional attitudes and behavior patterns with the charge that these are being corrupted, subverted, and defiled by conspiratorial agents and influences." <sup>12</sup> But this ideology is expedient only: "It commends itself by the example of its praxis." <sup>13</sup> Negativist, "its constructive purposes remain deliberately inchoate and equivocal." <sup>14</sup>

Mayer wishes us to believe that his counterrevolutionaries are radicals seeking stability, a tricky proposition. But by seeking out a mass following, the counterelite is, in effect, realizing that changes will have to be made. For example, the German National Socialists took the failure of the Weimar Republic as their point of departure. Instead of restoring a monarchy and giving the traditional elites and values a new lease on life, they sought to create a post-Weimar socio-political order based on the national-social precept of *Gemeinschaft*, which had never before occupied more than a peripheral place in the German consciousness. Nazi ideology had an overall leveling thrust, which was something new in Germany and which cut across political, social and economic lines, so that Nazism cannot be seen as merely backward looking, intending to preserve the interests of "superannuated" groups. As Eugen Weber noted, "... the question remains whether Mayer's counterrevolutionaries belong to the party of order or the party of change. Mayer answers: the former. They ... would not." <sup>15</sup> Indeed, in some countries, the

conservatives and reactionaries, disturbed by the fascist threat, turned against it.<sup>16</sup>

In his attempt to make counterrevolution more than antirevolution, but something other than revolution, Mayer's Left-Right schema falls apart. As a consequence the value of his contribution to the understanding of history diminishes somewhat. This is not to say that he is a charlatan, but merely that windmills are not giants. Certainly the Bolshevik Revolution had a definite impact on the policy of the European powers and the United States. But the battle between parties of movement and parties of order concerning war aims was hardly a grand offensive in an international civil war. New Diplomacy, the vague formulation of an altruistic foreign policy, was not really new in 1919, nor was it ever very important in the two decades between the wars. In Britain, France and Germany the most critical leftists during the war were minorities. Common nationalism and patriotism outweighed differences over policy. France never implemented *Carnet B* to jail socialist subversives. Neither the Kaiser nor General Ludendorff used the opportunity provided by the war to crush the SPD. British socialists were free to voice their dissent. Never has a civil war been so bloodless!

To insist, as Mayer does, that the punitive nature of the Treaty of Versailles was part of a counterrevolutionary campaign to undermine the position of the Left, which favored a peace without annexations, ignores the very real concerns for security against German aggression which permeated the Paris Peace Conference. And if victory in the war supposedly gave a mandate to the Right in the Allied countries to root out revolution in Europe, and in Bolshevik Russia, why did the Allied regimes cut back direct aid to the White Russians when they needed it most, in 1919? Why did they insist that Germany disband the *Freikorps* which had been employed so successfully in the anti-Bolshevik campaign in the Baltic states, and which constituted a sure defense against Spartacism in Germany? Mayer's assumptions leave too many questions unanswered.

Mayer's belief that "a stubborn aversion on the part of social and behavioral scientists, including historians, to the study of counterrevolution" constitutes a conspiracy of silence does not

bear scrutiny either.<sup>17</sup> In the period 1870 to 1956 there are some counterrevolutionary episodes, in Mayer's sense of the term, which have not received much attention. For example, the crushing of the Paris Commune has not been investigated from the point of view of the formation of policy in the Thiers regime. However, novel Rightist movements like "Boulangism" in France, or Karl Lueger's Christian Socialist movement in Vienna, have been anything but ignored in the literature. At least a dozen articles and a biography explore the thought and influence of the great Russian reactionary and imperial tutor, Konstantin Pobedonostsev. Numerous studies document the Allied intervention in Russia, and the German *Freikorps* has its literature. Legion are the investigations of European fascism. Where, then, is the conspiracy of silence shrouding counterrevolution?

#### *The Primacy of Domestic Politics*

So far, discussion has centered primarily on the four themes underlying and unifying Mayer's three books. But he has developed a related notion, which concerns the origins of wars in the era of the communist revolution. In a chapter which he contributed to *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn*, Mayer provides sketches of the domestic situations in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary and Russia on the eve of the Great War.<sup>18</sup> He concludes that in each country, "rising international tensions were accompanied by rising internal tensions — by mounting social, political, and economic struggles that radicalized the extremes, eroded the center, and inclined the governments to push preparedness and diplomatic abduracy as part of their efforts to maintain a precarious domestic status quo."<sup>19</sup> In short, tensions between the forces of order and forces of movement constituted a crisis situation, which impinged on the planning and execution of diplomatic policy.

Unfortunately, Mayer refrains from demonstrating the links between the policy makers and internal pressures. His generalizations are grossly inaccurate. For example, Italy did indeed experience a serious outbreak of strikes during Red Week in June of 1914. But, the socialist disturbances were easily crushed,

and, Mayer's thesis notwithstanding, the government opted for neutrality until 1915. When Italy finally did intervene in May 1915, the decision was basically a geopolitical one, and not intended as an anti-socialist coup. In another instance, Mayer muses that "surely it is not without significance that nearly all the superpatriots who clamored for preparedness and foreign-policy pugnacity held reactionary, ultraconservative, or protofascist views on domestic affairs."<sup>20</sup> How then does he account for Benito Mussolini who, with his syndicalist and fellow socialist followers, advocated Italian participation in the war because he felt that war was a form of revolution and that World War I seemed likely to favor pro-revolutionary developments? The left interventionists in Italy cannot be dismissed as protofascists (whatever Mayer means by the term) in 1915 just because they became fascists later. Again, Mayer's Left-Right axis fails to fit the facts adequately.

In 1969 Mayer published an article in *The Journal of Modern History*, proposing an investigation into the origins of war based on the "primacy of domestic politics" as the most important factor contributing to the decision for or against belligerency.<sup>21</sup> The notion that wars arise from internal causes and purposes reaffirms Mayer's Manichean *Weltanschauung* and follows in the vein of his earlier article on the domestic causes of World War I. Until this hypothesis is fully tested judgement must remain suspended. But the investigators will have to uncover convincing evidence establishing the links between domestic tensions and diplomatic policy-making to validate Mayer's hunch. Most likely, the "primacy of domestic politics" will turn out to be a relative concept, varying in usefulness from country to country, war to war. No phenomenon is so simple that an explanation on one level can suffice to replace a "cubistic", multifaceted, multilayered interpretation.

#### *The Fallacies Behind the "Mayerian Creed"*

The *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956*, purports to be an analytic framework providing a heuristic concept of counterrevolution. In light of the preceding criticisms of Mayer's ideas, the question naturally suggests itself: Is this what historians should be doing, that is, formulating artificial conceptual tools to examine a specific and arbitrarily restricted period of history? To



conceive of the existence of a closed period of history, characterized by a simple dualism such as revolution versus counterrevolution, is relatively easy. However, concepts are not events and Mayer's model is a mental construct which is not found in history. One is free to imagine that somehow windmills are giants, but this in no way facilitates an understanding of the properties and dynamics of windmills. Mayer's categories are imposed upon events rather than suggested by them, and thus, they become meaningless as investigative tools.

Nor can history be so easily compartmentalized. If the term counterrevolution is to have any utility, its application cannot be confined to eighty-six years of European history. That period is not self-contained but part of a larger whole, and any interpretation which does not treat it as such can only distort the understanding of events. The metaphor of the blind men confronting different portions of an elephant's anatomy, and drawing erroneous conclusions about the nature of the entire object before them, is a useful one for historians to keep in mind. Analytic frameworks only succeed when they sum up an historian's perceptions of the meaning of history in the broadest sense. Although Mayer is a brilliant man, much of his work is based on false suppositions and misguided notions of what an historian's task should be. As E. H. Carr said in one of his famous lectures on the nature of history, delivered at Cambridge University in the course of 1961,

"It is nonsense to say that generalization is foreign to history; history thrives on generalizations. . . . But do not suppose that generalization permits us to construct some vast scheme of history into which specific events must be fitted."<sup>22</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Arno J. Mayer, "Historical Thought and American Foreign Policy," in *The Historian and the Diplomat: The Role of History and Historians in American Foreign Policy*, ed: Francis L. Loewenheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytic Framework* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971; Harper Torchbooks, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> By New Diplomacy is meant foreign policy consonant with Wilson's Fourteen

Points: covenants openly arrived at via parliamentary debate, renunciation of annexations, international cooperation, and the like.

<sup>4</sup> Mayer, *Dynamics*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Eugen Weber, review of *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytic Framework*, by Arno J. Mayer, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 24 (June 1972): 281.

<sup>8</sup> Mayer, *Dynamics*, p. 50. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Weber, review of *Dynamics*, p. 281.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in Rumania King Carol crushed Corneliu Codreanu and his Iron Guard legionaries.

<sup>17</sup> Mayer, *Dynamics*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Arno J. Mayer, "Domestic Causes of the First World War," in *The Responsibility of Power: Historical Essays in Honor of Hajo Holborn*, eds.: Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1967), pp. 286-301.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292.

<sup>21</sup> Arno J. Mayer, "Internal Causes and Purposes of War in Europe, 1870-1956," *The Journal of Modern History* 41 (September 1969): 291-303.

<sup>22</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 82.

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