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## **IN SEARCH OF OUR ROOTS: REMEMBERING SIMONE WEIL'S NORTH AMERICAN EMERGENCE**

WESTERN EUROPE IS LIVING THROUGH SOMETHING of a Simone Weil moment just now. All over the continent, and certainly in Weil's native France, there is a sense that people are coming unmoored from their sense of belonging—to their nations, villages, families, and worlds. “Every human being needs to have multiple roots,” she asserted in what is probably her best-known work, *The Need for Roots* (1949). “It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.”<sup>1</sup> Like the book as a whole, this is a richly suggestive formulation, at once indicating that rootedness is the most important consideration for living a life that is truly moral and spiritually fulfilled yet also leaving ambiguous what that word “natural” might really mean. How does one “naturally” belong to an environment (or multiple environments)? Surely a conception of such ethical depth must go beyond mere accidents of birth.

Given this call for a greater ethical depth, it is easy to see what conventional politicians on both the left and the right might find in Weil's writing. And it's no surprise that the French-Catholic magazine *La Vie* published an article in November 2017 titled “Simone Weil: The New Muse of Political Types.”<sup>2</sup> Two months later, France's venerable left-Catholic review *Esprit* also published Robert Chenavier's take-down of this broad tendency of French politicians to claim Weil as their own. Lamenting how she has been made to serve the quasi-religious fervours of the left, right, and extreme right, Chenavier notes a similar sense of the similarly-named heroine of French progressivism Simone Veil (whose death in 2017 prompted much mourning across the political spectrum) and asks, “Under these circumstances, would it be too much to ask for politicians to just leave Simone

Weil in peace, without needing to find the next woman to put into the ‘pantheon?’”<sup>3</sup>

His impatience is understandable, but I’d like to suggest that Chénavier (the leading Weil scholar in France) might take a note or two from her experience on the other side of the ocean. Weil’s North American emergence began in 1945, just two years after she died, as Dwight Macdonald’s magazine *politics* started publishing translations of her work and she slowly came to stand for the kind of left that Macdonald and the *politics* group wanted to build—one that was nourished by a certain kind of conservatism. Starting in the late 1950s, the enormously influential Canadian philosopher George Grant also began offering a critique of technological modernity that was strongly influenced by Weil, whom he quite literally considered to be a saint, as she similarly spoke to the kind of conservatism that he wanted to build—one that was nourished by a certain kind of strongly communitarian left. For North Americans, therefore, Weil offered hope for a new kind of politics, which did not “move beyond left and right” but rather synthesized them, forcing partisans to focus their thought in ways that would have been impossible for their predecessors and increasing their own rigour, passion, and, indeed, partisanship. The North American Weil did not make friends from adversaries; if anything, she made crucially important thinkers more adversarial in tone, but in better ways. The experience of Weil in North America was not an experiment in some virtuous-sounding but ultimately bland form of “post-partisanship”; she was a real partisan, and she showed serious people on this continent what that might mean in an intellectual realm.

Some biographical detail is likely in order. Weil is not exactly an obscure figure, but there are aspects of her life that bear on what I’d like to discuss here and are likely not that widely known. After graduating in philosophy in 1931, she had a somewhat itinerant and brief career as a teacher in the French lycée system. But the 1930s saw her joining in the radical life of the late Third Republic. She began working in a factory in 1934, shortly after meeting Soviet revolutionary Leon Trotsky. Their meeting was spurred in part by the big man’s reading of Weil’s 1932 essay “Prospects: Are We Heading for the Proletarian Revolution?,” which reflects an important moment in her thought, as she denounced the actual experience of the U.S.S.R.’s first twenty years as defined by the domination of a newly-established bureaucracy. Four months after the Popular Front took the reins of government

in France in 1936, Weil left for Aragon and the Spanish Civil War to fight for the Republicans. Famously clumsy and nearsighted, she injured herself badly when she stepped into a pot of boiling oil and returned to France. 1937–1939 seem to be the “lost years,” in which she also found herself. She was always sick but also travelled a great deal with her family; she also taught for one semester at a lycée in Saint-Quentin. She had an initial religious awakening in Italy at a church linked to St. Francis of Assisi and then again at a Benedictine abbey. 1940–1942 saw her more itinerant than ever, as she and her family lived in Paris, Vichy, Marseille, and finally New York. Her notebooks from this period reveal the totality of her religiously-inflected vision of the world: “But an agreement with God is more real than any reality. With his friends, God establishes a conventional way of speaking. Every event in life is a word in this way of speaking.”<sup>4</sup> Late in 1942 she travelled from New York to London to join Charles de Gaulle’s Free France movement. It was there that she wrote her only finished book, *The Need for Roots*, which was meant to be a blueprint for what post-liberation France might look like. Although finished a few months after she arrived, it was published posthumously; Weil, sicker than ever (now with tuberculosis) and refusing to eat anything more than the rations that were given to those in Nazi-occupied France, died in August of 1943.<sup>5</sup>

Two years after her death she was “discovered” by Macdonald’s magazine *politics*. Although in total they published only four translations of her essays, her significant impact is a matter of consensus. Gregory D. Sumner’s history of the magazine calls Weil the “patron saint” of Macdonald and his collaborator Nicola Chiaromonte, and Kevin Coogan’s introduction to Macdonald’s political-philosophical treatise *The Root Is Man* (1953) states that “the most powerful intellectual influence on the journal was Simone Weil.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps because it was short-lived (it ran from 1944–1949), *politics* is much less well-remembered than its rival on the left, *Partisan Review*. But it was just as important for the development of the “New York Intellectuals” and the redefinition of American left politics along more intellectually rigorous lines. Macdonald’s signature combination of high seriousness and leftist idealism is on every page, and in addition to providing close attention to the politics of the wartime and immediately postwar US, *politics* was also invested in what was going on in Europe. Overall *politics* is notable because of the way that it faced the moral imperatives of its anti-totalitarian opposi-

tion to World War II, arguing in a March 1946 editorial that “[a]lready, Stalin’s Russia has taken the place of Hitler’s Germany as a ruthless totalitarian power that is out to upset the Anglo-American status quo.”<sup>7</sup> This sense that doctrinaire Marxism provided an inadequate understanding of the world defined *politics*’ overall sensibilities and clearly owed a great deal to Weil’s critique of the same. Macdonald saw this inability to talk bluntly about war as a real problem for the left, and he wrote in *The Root Is Man* that “[s]ince the chronic world warfare of our day was unknown to them, the theoreticians of socialism devoted their attention mainly to the internal class struggle and failed to work out an adequate theory of the political significance of the war; this gap still remains to be filled; until it is, modern socialism will continue to have a somewhat academic flavor.”<sup>8</sup> The first two Weil essays published in *politics* were precisely this kind of theoretical treatment of war: “Reflections on War,” published in February 1945, and “The Iliad or, The Poem of Force,” published in November 1945.

Of all the essays published in *politics*, “The Iliad or, The Poem of Force” was by far the most influential and long-lasting. It was translated by Mary McCarthy—a key member of the “New York Intellectuals”—and is not as dense a textual object as “Reflections on War,” which was translated by the pseudonymous “Candide.” That piece was more theoretical and more invested in an explicit rejection of Soviet-led leftism, featuring considerations such as “since every apparatus of oppression, once constituted, remains such until it is shattered, every war that places the weight of a military apparatus over the masses, forced to serve in its manoeuvres, must be considered a force of reaction, even though it may be led and directed by revolutionists.” Weil also wrote there that “whether the mask is labelled Fascism, Democracy, or Dictatorship of the Proletariat, our great adversary remains The Apparatus—the bureaucracy, the police, the military.”<sup>9</sup>

The Weil of “Reflections on War” was the philosopher that Macdonald wanted *politics* to emulate, as he was looking for a political philosopher who could provide an uncompromising critique of modern leftism and would be truly able to “work out an adequate theory of the political significance of the war.” The Weil of “The Iliad or, The Poem of Force,” on the other hand, was the kind of literary intellectual that McCarthy was in the process of becoming, as she was anathema to the tendency among French intellectuals to generalize but just as unsparing in her critique of technological modernity and all it hath wrought. In a letter to the editor of *politics* exactly one year

after her Weil translation appeared, McCarthy wrote that “[s]ince the *New Yorker* has not, so far as we know, had a rupture with the government, the scientists, and the boys in the bomber, it can only assimilate the atom bomb to itself, to Westchester County, to smoked turkey, and the Hotel Carlisle . . . . It is all one world.”<sup>10</sup> It is hard not to hear in this devastating analysis McCarthy’s earlier experience of rendering Weil’s indictment of all we have lost in modernity as “conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue.”<sup>11</sup>

Seeing Weil’s North American emergence in the pages of *politics* is not at all about reconciling a tension between the philosophical and the literary, any more than it is about presenting McCarthy or Macdonald as leftists who were somehow reconciled to the political right. What is more important to consider is the way in which Weil—so clearly a creature of both the left and the right—showed Macdonald the way towards a kind of political philosophy worthy of the name (one that explicitly refused to follow along with petty intra-party loyalties, arguments that were at once overly academic and fraught with deadly consequences) and showed McCarthy the ways in which that kind of philosophically rigorous critique could flow from the literary (Proust, Greek epic). That kind of dialogue—across forms, across languages, across subject matters—focused the attention of these great intellects at a crucial time, allowing them to move forward in their work and become the very best of what the “New York Intellectuals” hoped to embody.

The leading exponent of Weil’s work in Canada was certainly George Grant. Just as Macdonald was (and remains) better known for his writings on mass culture than he was for his more political-theoretical work with *politics*, Grant was better known for his fiery polemic *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965) than he was for his finely-tuned and theologically-informed writings on moral philosophy. And just as Macdonald’s work on mass culture was clearly indebted to the same sense of ethical purpose as his Weil-inflected work for *politics*, so too did Grant’s work, *Lament* very much included, bear her mark in all of its considerations. I noted above that Sumner thought Weil was a “patron saint” for Macdonald; that was literally true for Grant, who wrote that “she was not only a thinker but a saint, and the unity between justice and truth lies at the

heart of her teaching.”<sup>12</sup>

In one of his last published works, “In Defence of Simone Weil,” a harsh take-down of the Robert Coles’ biography *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (1987), Grant clarified his terms: “By ‘saint’ I mean those rare people who give themselves away.” This is a key clarification. He deplored Coles’ biography because he saw it as patronizing and superior in tone, written by a clinical psychiatrist at Harvard University who seemed to be diagnosing a neurotic. That combination was guaranteed to push Grant’s buttons. *Lament for a Nation* is widely remembered as putting a harshly anti-American spin on Canadian nationalism, yet those who have read it know that the work is also part of a larger critique of technology-led liberal imperialism. That is to say, it is quite close to *politics’* ongoing critique of American liberalism (as embodied by the New Deal Democrats and their wartime successors) and its tendency to prize technical expertise above all other considerations—a prioritization that (purely by coincidence, of course) fed into the interests of a voracious industrial-capitalist elite. Grant saw Coles as unqualified to engage with Weil not simply because he was American (as I, a native son of Philadelphia, hasten to point out) but also because he was a certain kind of American: technocratic, convinced of his own benevolence, and thus domination-prone. “It is hard to avoid anger when one’s chief modern teacher is patronised in the sweetie-pie accents of Cambridge, Mass., and Hampstead, U.K.,” he wrote (referring to Coles’ engagement with Anna Freud’s thoughts on Weil) before fuming that the book reads as though they were assessing the significance of Shakespeare in this way: “He did not do too badly, considering that he did not have the benefit of our help.”<sup>13</sup>

For Grant, this liberal-led, pseudo-scientific approach spoke of a larger will to mastery—a way of moving through the world that he saw as typically imperial-American and against which thinkers such as Weil were a bulwark. She was a bulwark partly because the intensity of her religious vision was so obviously a challenge to the clean efficiency that a domineering liberalism prizes and partly because that intensity of vision also led her to give up everything and submit herself fully to her times unto an untimely death. She thus stood as a sharp rebuke to the definition Grant once offered of liberalism as “a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man’s essence is his freedom and therefore that what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it.”<sup>14</sup> Canada, which Grant said was marked by a historic “willingness to use governmental control over

economic life to protect the public good as against private freedom,”<sup>15</sup> was another such efficiency-resistant bulwark. So was the university, which was something he spent a lot of time writing about in his later years. The key work there was his essay “The University Curriculum,” which was included in his collection *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (1969). It first appeared in a serialized version, though, and therein lies a tale.

That serialized version appeared in the fourth and fifth issues of *This Magazine Is About Schools*—a newly-launched quarterly about radical approaches to education. Contemporary readers will know it as *This Magazine*, the leading voice of today’s young (one might even say hipster) Toronto-centric left, but it was originally launched by students close to Rochdale College as an experiment in radical education. Early contributors included the writer Matt Cohen, who knew Grant because of the old guy’s support for the anti-war organization Students For Peace Action, which he helped to run, and the poet Dennis Lee, who edited many of Grant’s books and remained close to him for the rest of his life. The fifth issue also reprinted excerpts from Weil’s essay “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” (in the magazine the excerpt was titled “On Being Attentive”), in which Weil proclaims the need for joy if one is to be truly educated: “The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade.”<sup>16</sup> Some of Weil’s thoughts on education also appeared in *politics* as part of the essay “Factory Work,” in which she wrote of how school “must be conceived of in an entirely new way, that it may shape men [sic] capable of understanding the total aspects of the work in which they will be taking part. Not that the level of theoretic studies must be lowered; rather, the contrary. More should be done to excite intelligence to wakefulness, but at the same time teaching must itself become more concrete.”<sup>17</sup>

In an essay that preceded these excerpts, Grant pursued this need for a balance between theoretical and practical rigour in a way that owed a lot more to his long-time French teacher than to the comparatively clinical advice of John Henry Cardinal Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (1852), which a casual reader might assume is the relevant reference point. Grant wrote in the first part of “The University Curriculum” that philosophy “no

longer claims to be concerned with what are the highest possibilities for men [sic] . . . Their scholars have gained their unassailable status of mastery and self-justification by surrendering their power to speak about questions of immediate and ultimate meaning—indeed generally by asserting that such questions only arise through confusion of mind.”<sup>18</sup> This imperative for philosophy (and the university that keeps it alive) to speak about questions that are *both* immediate and ultimate goes well beyond the Newmanesque need to balance practical and moral education. For Grant, as for Weil, this need to balance the immediate and the ultimate is a moral matter *tout court*, which speaks to a larger vision of a society that is not solely devoted to the kinds of technical mastery that sustain capitalism.

As with *politics* and its redefinition of the wartime American left, this dialogue that Grant was conducting with young Canadian progressives via Weil was not about a reconciliation or a “moving beyond” into some sort of post-partisan fantasyland. Grant was part of the right just as clearly as Macdonald and McCarthy were part of the left—that is to say, not very clearly at all. The Canadian, just like his fellow students of Weil in the U.S., was looking for a better, more serious version of political philosophy, and all were restless with the party-political commitments they had made. Weil’s unshakable commitment was what shone the light towards this vision. This had nothing to do with party loyalties (she famously thought political parties should be abolished)<sup>19</sup> but was rather about aspiring to a certain way of being in the world. Hers was never a way defined by the dulcet tones of politicians (in contemporary France or elsewhere) who insist that they are only being pragmatic by wanting to rationally embrace both sides. Nobody who grapples with Weil could see her as a hallmark of either pragmatism or rationalism. She was someone who could see the world darkening around her and also see the degree to which “the sweetie-pie accents” of those presiding over that darkness, however benevolently, were part of the problem. Her mystical sensibilities, moral intensity, and unshakable hostility towards faceless and amoral power in whatever form were the qualities that spoke to both the *politics* group as well as Grant and his circle. Cohen, reviewing Grant’s biography from a decidedly leftist standpoint, wrote that “his most dangerous message was not a call to action but a call to Being.”<sup>20</sup> That is a call that Grant, like the staunchly secular Macdonald and the complicatedly Catholic McCarthy, first heard from Weil. It is a call we have never needed to listen to more.

## Notes

1. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge, 2002), 43.
2. Pascale Tournier, "Simone Weil, nouvelle muse des politiques," *La Vie*, 25 Oct. 2017, [bit.ly/Tournier](http://bit.ly/Tournier).
3. Robert Chenavier, "Pour Simone Weil," *Esprit*, January-February 2019, 16. Chenavier is making an impatient joke here, since Weil, unlike Veil, is actually buried in Le Panthéon. One of the Weil-o-philic conservative writers who irritates him is David Brunat, who penned a piece in the centre-right daily *Le Figaro* suggesting that Weil should join Veil there, writing that they are "two illustrious examples of humanist and courageous women, both of whom had *une certaine idée* of civilisation and of *fraternité* in the face of barbarism and of all that causes humanity to fade." David Brunat, "Panthéon: Simone Weil pour accompagner Simone Veil?," *Le Figaro*, 5 July 2017, [bit.ly/Brunat](http://bit.ly/Brunat).
4. Simone Weil, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 926.
5. This biography is mostly derived from Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987) and David Anderson, *Simone Weil* (London: SCM Press, 1971).
6. See Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle: The Challenge of Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 193 and Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), 22.
7. Dwight Macdonald, "Comment," *politics* 3, no. 3 (March 1946): 65.
8. Macdonald, *The Root Is Man*, 81.
9. Simone Weil, "Reflections on War," *politics* 2, no. 2 (February 1945): 53 and 55.
10. Mary McCarthy, letter to the editor, *politics* 3, no. 10 (November 1946): 367; rpt. in Mary McCarthy, *On the Contrary: Articles of Belief, 1946–1961* (New York: Noonday, 1966), 5.
11. Simone Weil, "The Iliad or, The Poem of Force," *politics* 2, no. 11 (November 1945): 325.
12. George Grant, "Pétrément's Simone Weil," in *The George Grant Reader*, ed. William Christian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 254.
13. *Ibid.*, 257.
14. George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 114n3.

15. George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 83.
16. Simone Weil, "On Being Attentive," *This Magazine Is About Schools* 5 (Winter 1968): 102; rpt. in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 61.
17. Simone Weil, "Factory Work," *politics* 3, no. 11 (December 1946): 375.
18. George Grant, "The University Curriculum, part 1," *This Magazine Is About Schools* 4 (Autumn 1967): 84; see also *Technology and Empire*, 126.
19. See Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 27–29. She offers a more expansive view of this belief in *Notes sur la suppression générale des partis politiques* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2017).
20. Matt Cohen, "George Grant: The Life of an Uncomfortable Philosopher," *Toronto Star*, December 18, 1993, F18.