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My Favorite Mistake

Timothy Shenk

My first issue as co-editor of *Dissent* was published in the summer of 2018, which at the time felt like the beginning of something. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez had just knocked off Nancy Pelosi's heir apparent, Bernie Sanders was putting together his next presidential campaign, and DSA memberships were zooming upward. It seemed, too, like arguments that divided earlier generations of leftists were melting away. Electorally minded reformers were embracing positions that once seemed radical, and radicals were getting ready to knock doors for Bernie. This was our version of the popular front, and it was so damn exciting to be part of it.

Dissent wasn't at the forefront of this shift, but more than sixty years of advocating democratic socialism counted for something—a not unimportant piece of left-wing history that we could draw on to make a better future. I don't think little magazines shape the course of history, but I love them anyway, along with the work that goes into making them: pitching ideas, finding the perfect writer for a piece, dragging those perfect writers through more rounds of edits than they would like, and contributing your own stuff from time to time. There's no strict relationship between style and substance, but I've always felt that a particular kind of thinking, and therefore a particular kind of politics, fits especially well with this approach. It's principled without being partisan, engaged with the world but not a prisoner of the moment.

In the way of fresh editors, I came into the job with a lengthy to-do list. I've taken care of a decent portion of it over the years, but one idea I never managed to pull off was a recurring section I wanted to call "My Favorite Mistake." The hope was to provide a space where writers could own up to being wrong and talk about what they learned from the experience. That should be the point of thinking in public—not proving how right you've always been, but showing how to learn from a world that's more complicated than any of us can fully grasp. And maybe I had a sneakier motive too: an unacknowledged assumption that old-timers would welcome a chance to get right with the kids of today, the ones who understood that yesterday's rules no longer applied.

Which, I now think, was a mistake of my own. Looking back on the summer of 2018, it's clear that the democratic socialist moment was closer to its end than its beginning. There were major structural factors behind the boomlet, including brutal levels of economic inequality,