

THE IRON HEEL

May 3, 2020: During the Corona Virus, U. S. billionaires increased their wealth by 434 billion dollars. Jeff Bezos got his share: \$34, 600, 000, 000; Mark Zuckerberg \$25, 000, 000, 000. But this is old news. In August the super rich got even richer: \$637 billion more during the pandemic.

But I digress even before I've started. And now another digression.

In September their combined wealth increased to \$845 billion. It's hard to keep up with how hard these billionaires have worked. Sorry, and by the time I write this review, the richest of the rich will most likely have surpassed the thousand billion mark.

And another. I read a week or so ago that Bezos had made so much money during the pandemic that he could have given each of the people who work for him a \$100,000 bonus and still had money left over. You'd have to do the math to see exactly how much those workers might have gotten.

I first read Jack London's *The Iron Heel* 36 years ago, yes, in 1984, and Orwell had said that he admired how accurate was London's predictions about fascism. Even the critics eager to dismiss the novel have acknowledged London's ability to predict the strategies and policies that brought about the fascist states of World War II: Germany, Italy, and Japan. It's worth asking, how a novel written in 1906 and published two years later could be so prescient. London looked backward at American history to see forward into his time and ours; and so *The Iron Heel* has become a roadmap for the rise of American fascism. London wasn't much of a theorist, but he was an observer of unchecked capitalism. He saw how people lived, listened to their stories, and that gave him all he needed to make the subject of his novel believable, and relevant now even more than a century ago. But what is the subject of this novel?

Summaries of the plot are easy to find, and there are some clear analyses of the novel's form, its innovative narrative structure. And for the most part, critics have dismissed the novel using aesthetic judgements, again, then as now as London would have expected given its subject. But what is the subject? From the title it's suggestive, and later made clear, that it is homegrown Made in the USA Fascism. About a fourth of the way into the story the subject is named: The Oligarchy.

It's no accident that this is the same name former President Carter and the recent University of Princeton study gave to the US, not a democracy but an oligarchy, in short a system of government that to slightly alter Abraham Lincoln's description of the US is a government of the rich, by the rich, for the rich. It's not just good fortune (Is there any fortune that is good?) that the Walton family is worth at least \$138 billion, more wealth than 43% of American families combined. The average U. S. middle class family income: \$78, 000.

And then there was the Supreme Court ruling for Citizens United giving corporations the right to give unlimited money to political candidates.

Obviously, London knew none of this, but he would not have been surprised. Nor would he have been surprised by the cover on the edition of his novel that I first read: a picture signaling the other 9/11, a black boot poised above the head of Salvador Allende, the elected president of Chile, deposed with the help of Corporate America, the CIA, Richard Nixon, and Bill and Hillary's good friend Henry Kissinger.

Other examples of the U. S. Corporate foreign policy are easy to find. When Jimmy Carter said, "The best way to enhance freedom in other lands is to demonstrate here that our democratic system is worthy of emulation" the assumption was that America is a democracy. He learned later that it was not. And so the emulation now is fascism. Just as Hitler learned from the US eugenics programs, and South Africa's apartheid governments learned from American southern politicians who showed how to reverse post-Civil War Reconstruction to disenfranchise the newly emancipated Black population, political parties world-

wide are learning from Republican Party policies and techniques on immigration, voter suppression, and electronic surveillance.

Before Carter, President Dwight Eisenhower experienced the fading of democratic principles and policies. It was only as he was leaving office that he was willing, or able, to broadcast his warning about the military-industrial complex. Carter has been the only former President to be so aware as to state that the US is no longer a democracy. However, he is unwilling or unable to state that it never was, although he must have read the words of John Adams, the second President, and couldn't have missed what amounts to Adams' statement of the foundation of Fascism: "The moment the idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence."

A nation based upon conquest and slavery, founded on freedom only for white men, and the "sacredness" of property over people is no democracy and has made fascism inevitable. Even a cursory look at American history gives plenty of examples of home grown fascism: the brief rule of Huey Long; George H. Bush's father Senator Prescott Bush who was almost convicted of giving aid to Hitler; his son who supported a raft of police-state policies; his grandsons who used the Supreme Court to enact a bloodless presidential coup. And of course there is Trump who has learned from them all. But given the propaganda of corporate media and an education system that ignores what Howard Zinn calls "the People's History", systems promoting a history that ignores the endless wars that have established US military bases in almost every country in the world, that suppresses any information about the US support of fascist coups and assassinations, that have denied democracies in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, the question asserts itself: how does a reader of a novel come to see the US as an Empire that has now turned on its own people?

London used the only novelistic technique that might work. The genius of London's novel was using a woman narrator, Avis, from the privileged class skeptical of the Socialist politics of the man she eventually marries: Ernest Everhard. Admittedly, this hero's name is a bit much, like some of Dickens' (Scrooge, Rosa Bud, Cripples, Crummies, Cruncher, Uriah Heap etc) London probably enjoyed the sexual connotation, but Avis is referred to throughout the novel as Avis Everhard, so we can assume the main suggestion for the name is that both Avis and Ernest are hard: steadfast, unbending, rigid, and firm in their belief of the demise of the oppressor class and the eventual victory of the oppressed. Avis' journey from unaware to aware but un-believing to believing but not-active to active and "hard" in her resolve to bring about the defeat of the Oligarchy is what London must have hoped would be the readers' journey as well.

Avis first objects to Ernest's characterization of the courts as not the apolitical guardians of Law but as servants of the rich, ready and able to assist choosing a President (George W. Bush v. Gore), making free speech dependent upon money (Citizens United), overturning convictions against the wealthy (A study of Justice Antonin Scalia found that he voted for white-collar defendants 82 percent of the time .), allowing the most wealthy to pay the least in taxes (Trump paid less than \$ 800 in Federal Income taxes in 2017) and so on and on and on.

One of the biggest challenges to Avis' beliefs is Ernest's attack on religion. But Avis experienced the hypocrisy of Christian religions that ignores the actions of Christ to chase the money changers from the temple and the words of Christ, like the Sermon on the Mount, and especially Proverbs: "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him". When Avis' Bishop friend is imprisoned and declared insane for helping the poor, she finally understands. After release from his imprisonment, the former bishop hides but continues to practice what later would be called Liberation Theology, Christian solidarity with the poor. Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger who later became Pope Benedict effectively excised the heresy of practicing what Jesus preached and encouraged American Catholics to vote for Conservative politicians.

Avis witnesses the attacks on labor unions and the promotion of industrial unions needed by the Oligarchy to provide essential services and to divide the working class. London did not see the liberal President Woodrow Wilson's Palmer Raids and the 1917 trial of the Industrial Workers of the World who sought One Big Union. But he would have understood why today only about 10 percent of Americans belong to any unions. He would have understood the diminishing of the middle class and why President Ronald Reagan taxed social security, in 1984 though few acknowledge the significance of it happening that year. He portrayed Avis' disbelief that the Government would use the displaced and disadvantaged to attack the vestige of democracy that remained. He would have expressed no surprise that Donald Trump calls for the neo-Nazi Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by"; he calls the Charlottesville white supremacists good people; defends Kyle Rittenhouse the murderer of two peaceful protestors in Kenosha, Wisconsin. And on and on and on.

After the Oligarchy uses the army and its "Black Hundreds" (private mercenaries like those of Eric Prince, brother of Trump's Secretary of Education) to sacrifice the whole city of Chicago to demonstrate to all other cities the folly of resisting fascism. It's then Avis understands that political principles and policies are nothing but window dressing for the Oligarchy disguising what should be obvious: power is everything and does everything necessary to disguise what should be obvious, that such power derives from concentrated wealth.

London names the seat of American resistance the Chicago Commune, most likely based upon the 1871 Paris Commune. And the incident that provided the excuse for the attack by the mercenary army was most likely the 1886 Haymarket Affair, where an agent provocateur (most likely) threw a bomb into a crowd listening to speeches calling for the 8-hour work day. One of the speakers accused and later hung was Albert Parsons. His wife Lucy was a militant socialist most famous for her speeches about the futility of elections, something that Avis Everhard only learned after the Oligarchy destroyed Chicago. Lucy, was once arrested for handing out flyers advertising her husband's book. And when she died, the police confiscated her books, about 1500 of them. Censorship with a vengeance. Parsons on elections is exactly how London presents it:

"The fact is money and not votes is what rules the people. And the capitalists no longer care to buy the voters, they simply buy the 'servants' after they have been elected to 'serve.'" Her short version is "Never be deceived that the rich will allow you to vote away their wealth." The pop version is the opening line of Timbuk 3's "The Future's So Bright": "Presidential elections are planned distractions / To divert attention from the action / behind the scenes". And there is the even shorter pop version by America's Nobel Prize for Literature former folk singer: " This world is ruled by violence /But I guess that's better left unsaid".

London knew that his novel would not be well received, and among the literary critics it wasn't and hasn't been since. In a secular time using aesthetic judgements is more common than using moral judgements to dismiss writing that threatens to show that Empire has no clothes or that the yellow brick road leads to the bought and paid for Wizard controlling everything from behind the curtain. London was famous for adventure stories about survival in the wild. Thirty-three years after *The Iron Heel*, another novel was published that threatened to expose the power of the American Oligarchy long before President Carter announced it. West Virginia writer Herbert Skidmore wrote *Hawks Nest*, the story the construction of a tunnel through Gauley Mountain that exposed the Union Carbide's killing of hundreds of miners, although the real number is a thousand and more: the bodies of the Black minors were hauled a few miles away from Gauley Bridge, West Virginia and dumped in a corn field. Immediately upon publication, the courts brought an injunction against the publisher to stop, forced it to destroy the printing plates, and recall all books that had been sent to book stores. A former mayor of Gauley Bridge told me that when he reprinted Skidmore's novel and Muriel Rukeyser's documentary poem *U. S. I*, which was about the same subject, local people were more upset about the poem than the novel. Fiction, after all, is fiction. But Rukeyser didn't change the names of the corporate officials who disregarded all safety procedures and the doctors who helped deny benefits to the families of miners who had sickened and died from silicosis.

London lived eight years after *The Iron Heel* was published. He seems to have abandoned promoting socialism. He was wealthy enough to build his own gated community to isolate him, some family, and friends against the political storm he had predicted would happen sooner or later. He showed that he was no Everhard. But Avis and Ernest were, after all, fictitious. But London's "retreat" is an illustration of sorts, predictable within the novel by its demonstration of corporate control of media and the academic writers dependent, then as now, on corporate largesse. Not even an excerpt from *The Iron Heel* is included in *The Portable Jack London*. Say the name "Jack London" to any reader of American fiction; if the name is recognizable it's as the author of *The Call of the Wild* and the short story "To Build a Fire", nature survival-lit, but few if any would name the political survival-literature *The Iron Heel*.