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"I Went to Learn"
Meanings of the European Tour of Senator Robert M. La Follette,
1923

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In 1923, progressive Senator Robert M. La Follette, an astute observer of government, economics, and social conditions, toured Europe in preparation for his third-party presidential bid. This article examines that trip and its legacy, particularly in relation to Daniel T. Rodgers' 1998 book *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*.¹

Rodgers offers a substantial reinterpretation of Euro-American social reform in the decades 1880-1940. He asserts that the reconstruction of American social politics during that period "was of a part with movements of politics and ideas throughout the North Atlantic world that trade and capitalism had tied together."² In particular, Rodgers emphasizes the "set of working practical examples" Europe provided American progressives.³ He concludes that the New Deal programs of the 1930s were not new, "but rather the ideas that had been germinated within the Atlantic community in the early part of the century."⁴ On November 4,

¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1998), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴ Katherine G. Aiken, review of Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, H-Pol, 31 January 2000. Rodgers cites social insurance and the Resettlement Administration as primary examples.

1999, three electronic history lists combined to present a symposium on *Atlantic Crossings*.⁵ Six scholars from a variety of fields debated the merits of Rodgers's arguments. His critics questioned his emphasis on political agendas and programmatic ideas rather than outcomes. Others conceded the impact of European ideas on American social politics, but stressed that the successes were geographically limited and frequently short-lived and that Rodgers exaggerates their significance.

A study of Robert M. La Follette's 1923 trip to Europe sheds new light on Rodgers's thesis. As congressman, governor and senator, La Follette had dedicated his life to returning power to the people. His efforts to establish his famed Wisconsin Idea nationwide ultimately brought about a truer democracy. Counted among his victories are the direct election of senators; public disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures; initiatives and referendums; and more equitable taxation. He worked to limit the power and wealth of big business and served American consumers by helping to create the Department of Labor, the Tariff Commission, and the Federal Trade Commission and to expand the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission. Legislation he pushed led to physical valuation of railroad property; rate classification; exemption of labor organizations from antitrust laws; regulation of telephone and telegraph rates and services; higher wages, lower hours, and better conditions for American workers, most notably seamen; women's suffrage; the building and operation of the Alaskan railroad; and environmental protection including the investigation which revealed the Teapot Dome scandal. He also labored for civil rights of the racially and economically oppressed. Due to the intensity of his efforts, noted one contemporary, "he well deserved the affectionately bestowed, though not always affectionately used, title of 'Fighting Bob.'"⁶ The legacy of La Follette's many battles prompted Senator William Borah to comment in 1925, upon learning of his colleague's death, "It is hard to say the right thing about Bob La Follette. You know, he lived about 150 years."⁷

⁵The electronic symposium appeared on H-SHGAPe. See <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl> for 4 November 1999.

⁶ Florian Lampert, "Remember La Follette for Battles Won," *La Follette's Magazine (LM)* 19, (4) (April 1927): 57.

⁷Frederic A. Ogg, "Robert M. La Follette in Retrospect," in Robert S. Maxwell, *La Follette*

It is probably that 150 years of living crammed into a mere seventy that has led historians to give La Follette’s European tour short shrift. The standard La Follette biography for the last quarter of a century, David Thelen’s *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (1976), barely mentions the trip. My own *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (2000), although offering a more expansive interpretation of La Follette’s personal and political life, still dedicates only a total of three pages to presenting and analyzing the events and repercussions of his European sojourn. More details appear in *Robert M. La Follette* (1953), the biography begun by La Follette’s wife Belle Case La Follette, and completed by their daughter Fola after her mother’s death. However, even Fola La Follette devotes but one short chapter, constituting fourteen pages of her 1,305 page opus, to the trip undertaken by her parents and the older of her two younger brothers. And even this relatively extensive coverage, like the rest of her two-volume tome, frequently drifts into the hagiographic and rarely offers critical analysis. La Follette’s presence in Europe is noted in Rogers’s *Atlantic Crossings* and the senator’s visit to Russia is discussed in Lewis Feuer’s *Marx and the Intellectuals* (1969) and Padriac Kennedy’s “LaFollette and the Russians,” in *Mid-America* (1971). However, the bulk of the information surrounding the trip and its consequences remains scattered, resting primarily in La Follette’s own accounts written for the Hearst press and republished in *La Follette’s Magazine* as well as in the letters, memoirs, and other writings of a number of his contemporaries. This article, in seeking to explore Rodgers’s hypothesis, seeks as well to provide a more complete account of La Follette’s European tour and offer a deeper analysis of what it meant to his 1924 campaign and to progressivism at large.⁸

(*Great Lives Observed*). New York: Prentice and Hall, 1969), 130.

⁸See David P. Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1976); Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Belle Case La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette*, 2 vols., (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953); Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), and Padraic Kennedy, “LaFollette and the Russians,” *Mid-America* 53 (3) 1971:190-208.

The irrepressible La Follette's detailed accounts of his 1923 trip offer some revealing insights into European conditions between the wars, insights that only a man who had dedicated his life to upholding certain American ideals in the real-life arena of politics could have produced. La Follette's succinct portraits of the leaders of Europe reveal much about his social values and provide a vivid slice of European inter-war politics. And the response of the American public to La Follette's depictions, particularly from within the intellectual community, brings into question assertions of staunch American inter-war isolationism and contributes to the ongoing debate concerning origins and implications of Euro-American social reform between the wars. In the end, even as La Follette's travels serve to test and illuminate Daniel Rodger's provocative thesis, Rodgers's work in turn offers a new lens through which to view the depth of Robert La Follette's contributions to progressivism in America even after World War I. La Follette's European tour inspired his subsequent efforts to shape both foreign and domestic policy. The influence of La Follette's European sojourn is evident from the pages of *La Follette's Magazine* to his specific legislative proposals. His actions ranged from his avid support of agricultural cooperatives to his warnings of the coming second world war. These actions in turn contribute to the significance of his legacy to the New Deal and beyond, all of which disprove allegations that he and his fellow progressives, in losing their momentum, also lost completely their ability to influence and transform policy following the war.

Time was nonetheless running out for Robert M. La Follette in 1923. His physician warned this man who had represented Wisconsin in the Senate for the past seventeen years that he would be dead in two years unless he worked only moderately and with proper periods of rest and relaxation. La Follette replied, "I don't want to--I just can't--live rolled up in a cotton blanket in a damned wheelchair. I want to die, as I have lived, with my boots on.... We are going right ahead with our plans [for the 1924 presidential campaign], with a full head of steam in the boiler."⁹ But concerns about more than just failing health plagued the progressive war horse.

La Follette had dedicated himself throughout his political career

⁹Phil La Follette, *Adventures in Politics: The Memoir of Philip La Follette*, Donald Young, ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 89.

to establishing himself as a champion for domestic reform. It was this very reputation which he had labored so many years to create that in 1923 seemed to him to be damning his already slim chances for the presidency. In 1917 La Follette was one of the “willful little men” denounced by Wilson for their attempt to thwart the vote on armed neutrality and who thereby, in the words of the president, “rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible.” That opposition, as well La Follette’s rejection of the League of Nations, combined with his unswerving dedication to curing the nation’s domestic ills, left him, in the minds of many Americans in Congress, in the press, and in the general public, a political isolationist totally unprepared to take on the foreign responsibilities of the nation’s chief executive. In fact, La Follette’s interest in foreign affairs was avid, and had been integrated into his commitment to progressive ideals.¹⁰

La Follette’s perception of how to best apply progressive ideals beyond U.S. boundaries continued to differ from Wilson’s, however. In the waning days of World War I, La Follette stridently denounced economic and political imperialism while defending self-determination--even when it meant the establishment of non-capitalist-based economies under non-democratic forms of government. He was outraged when Wilson’s plea for \$100,000,000 for European war relief was met by demands within the Senate that none of the funds be allotted to Germany. La Follette characterized the proposed neglect of war-vanquished Germany as vindictive and inhumane. He believed that Americans should be concerned with saving the lives of starving peoples rather than demanding contrition or dictating political systems. He asked his fellow Senators to envision “our good old Uncle Sam dispensing charity to the starving peoples of Europe[:] their hands stretched out to him shrunken with hunger and starvation, little children about his knees, pale, emaciated, their hands so thin you can see through them.” “Think,” he urged, “of charity represented in the person of this figure that stands for American benevolence and philanthropy turning away a starving child because it is of German heritage.” Passionately he concluded, “Charity...is the very spirit of the Christ life. Charity represents and stands for all the principles

¹⁰See Unger, *Fighting Bob*, Chapter Thirteen.

of His teachings.”¹¹ Such dramatic pleas did little to alter his reputation as an exclusively domestic reformer.

In the wake of the war, La Follette’s interest in touring Europe grew as the 1924 campaign loomed increasingly large. Although he continued to focus primarily on domestic issues, he became convinced that a European tour would provide him, in the minds of the public, with the foreign affairs credentials he was perceived as lacking. In the early planning stages, he envisioned the pages of his own beloved *La Follette’s Magazine* as the ideal showcase for the wisdom, expertise, and insight into global issues his exposure to various the European nations was sure to provide.

Financed by a wealthy admirer, La Follette’s traveling party included his wife, feminist Belle Case La Follette, son and successor-in-training, Robert M. La Follette, Jr., and fellow progressives Basil and Marie Manly. They sailed from New York on the *George Washington* on 1 August 1923. Four other senators were also on board, indicating a strong interest in Europe among American politicians.¹² The La Follette party’s three month tour included England, Germany, the Soviet Union, Poland, Austria, Italy, Denmark, and France. In London, La Follette met with John Maynard Keynes and Norman Angell. In Germany, he conferred with the nation’s new chancellor (and later foreign minister) Gustav Stresemann; Reichstag members; labor chiefs; newspaper editors; and industrialists, financiers and business leaders. The devastating effects of German food shortages and inflation overwhelmed La Follette.¹³

The party was joined by journalist Lincoln Steffens and sculptor Jo Davidson. La Follette posed for Davidson in Paris in 1923 for the statue now on permanent display in the Capitol’s rotunda in Washington. On 30 August the enlarged party arrived in Moscow where La Follette met with Boris Tchitcherin, minister of foreign affairs, and Aleksei Rykov, the acting premier. La Follette’s sympathy for the Soviet state had already

¹¹Robert M. La Follette, *Congressional Record (CR)*, 57, pt. 2:1983.

¹²The other senators were James Robinson, William B. McKinley, Kenneth McKellar, and Claude Swanson.

¹³Belle Case La Follette (BCL) and Fola La Follette (FL), *Robert M. La Follette*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), vol. 2, 1086.

been well established. On the floor of the U.S. Senate he had long championed the rights of the newly formed republic, opposing Wilson's placing of American troops in the infant nation in 1918, and repeatedly insisting that Russia's self-determined economic and political state be respected.¹⁴

The Russian newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* began their extensive coverage of La Follette's visit by noting with approval his call for the resumption of relations between Soviet Russia and the United States.¹⁵

Pravda noted proudly La Follette's intense interest in the pavilion of the Agricultural Union at the Soviet exhibition in Moscow. La Follette and his party spent an entire day at the pavilion where the Senator expressed particular enthusiasm for the industrial work of cooperative organizations, which were “the basis for the manufacture of goods and articles necessary for peasant agricultural industry.” La Follette praised “the variety, richness, and magnitude” of the pavilion, declaring “an exhibition of this magnitude, substance and conception acquires an absolutely exceptional meaning among all European exhibitions,” including those he had visited personally in Manchester and in Germany.¹⁶

Belle La Follette sent dispatches to the family organ chronicling her unfiltered reactions as the tour progressed. She expressed openly, for example, her admiration for the new Russian government. She praised the Soviets for, among other things, quickly enacting the kinds of labor reforms that Florence Kelly and the Consumers' League continued, unsuccessfully, to demand within the United States.¹⁷ Bob La Follette continued to generally reserve judgment, at least on paper, pouring his energies into the moment, although he did take copious notes from which to construct his articles upon his return. La Follette was hardly mute

¹⁴See Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, Chapter Fifteen.

¹⁵“Arrival of Senator La Follette,” *Pravda* (8 September 1923): 3; “Arrival of American Senator La Follette,” *Izvestia* (8 September 1923): 3. All translations from the Russian by Maria Kiehn, Stanford University.

¹⁶“Americans at the Exhibition,” *Pravda* (11 September 1923): 3.

¹⁷See BCL, “With Senator La Follette in Russia,” *LM* (December 1923): 184-7.

throughout the tour, however. In Rome, for example, he expressed directly to Benito Mussolini his dismay at the lack of freedom of the press throughout Italy.

Robert La Follette, Jr., called their European trip "profitable," for it allowed his father to gather information of "invaluable service" to him in his work in the Senate and in the impending campaign. La Follette, Sr., called this, his first and only trip abroad, "the biggest experience of my life," and confided wistfully, "It was wrong that Belle and I did not go to Europe thirty years earlier. Everyone should go to Europe and go in youth."¹⁸ Upon his return to the United States, he set about organizing his thoughts on Europe into a series of articles published for the Sunday edition of the Hearst newspapers, which had recruited him by emphasizing the syndicate's aggregate reading public of twenty-five million daily readers. The circulation of La Follette's own magazine, which he frequently had delivered to both houses of Congress free of charge, ranged somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 (with about half the subscribers in Wisconsin). Hearst's offer, an opportunity to impress La Follette's expertise in foreign affairs upon millions of potential voters in addition to providing much needed income, was simply too good to refuse.

Bob La Follette's reports have little of the immediacy of his wife's "Seeing Europe With Senator La Follette" articles. His "What I Saw in Europe" series offers instead a more thoughtful political and social analysis concerning the potential domestic and international repercussions of what he had witnessed. On the international level, although he too expressed enthusiasm for the Soviet experiment, his praise was hardly unqualified. He noted that Lenin, then in his final illness, was beloved by the peasants, yet La Follette was greatly disturbed by the lack of free elections and free press, the general suppression of civil liberties and the exile and "outrageous" treatment of political opponents. Nonetheless he predicted publicly, "It may not come in ten years. It may not come in twenty. But I shall live to see Russia one of the greatest democracies on earth," an unrealistic, wishful conjecture in view of the pervasiveness of the conditions he noted and the state of his own health. His short-term prediction was less grandiose, but more accurate: "Russia is destined to play a large if not dominant part in the international developments of the

¹⁸BCL and FL, *La Follette*, 2:1086.

next ten years." Accordingly, La Follette urged that the "process of awakening Russia to demand the fundamentals of democracy...be hastened by the renewal of intercourse with the outside world."¹⁹

La Follette said that he went to Europe because "powerful forces would continue to be exerted to persuade or dragoon the United States into European affairs," and he wanted to be able to see for himself "the results of the experiments in government now being made in Europe," and to form his judgments on personal knowledge, not "the mass of propaganda with which congress is always flooded."²⁰ Upon his return he urged Americans, especially his colleagues in the Senate, to rethink their attitudes towards the new Russian republic as well as their perceptions of their own, more established nation-state. He encouraged the United States and other countries to recognize the Soviet Union and reestablish trade and commercial relations. He even invited the Soviets to send a committee to Wisconsin to study the reforms he had implemented there.

But more than just his reactions to Russia marked La Follette's assessment of Europe's future. His recommendations concerned the potential relationships between and among its various nations as well as their relationships with the United States. La Follette contrasted Mussolini's power with the vulnerability of the demoralized citizens of almost every European country.²¹ La Follette noted that the common people were "wearied by the ten years of war and turmoil which they have endured, have lost faith in their power to control their destinies and are in a state of mind which makes them an easy prey to the forces of reaction and tyranny." He continued, "I went to Europe five years after the end of the 'war to end war' and 'to make the world safe for democracy'--four years after the so-called peace of Versailles. Instead of peace, I found new wars in the making." The people, according to La Follette, "have come to doubt whether it is possible to achieve international justice or self-government. This fact...lies at the basis of the movements to seize

¹⁹Ibid., 1082. RML, Article 4, 1923; RML, Unidentified article, 1923, RLP, B-227, LFC.

²⁰RML, "What I Saw in Europe: Germany Faces Famine," *LM* (December 1923): 180.

²¹See unsigned, 26 September 1923, RLP, B-95, LFC.

control of the machinery of government by force and establish dictatorships." Because the people had forgotten "that their ultimate safety and happiness lies only in themselves," they were "ready to trust their fortunes to any adventurer or would-be Napoleon who offers by force to rid them of the dire conditions that are then irritating or oppressing them."²²

Conditions in the countries La Follette toured varied, yet certain commonalities remained: "Between the upper and nether millstones of imperialistic and communistic dictatorships--between the fascists and bolshevists of the different countries--the institutions of democracy are being ground to dust." He turned first to Italy, where "the black-shirted fascists have elevated Mussolini to a dictatorship which overrides parliaments and courts of justice. The liberal forces dare not speak." Things were no better in Russia: "the communists, backed by the Red army, have crushed the opposition." Germany, he observed, "is now being rent asunder by civil strife, in which monarchists and communists are simultaneously striving to tear down the republic and erect in its place a dictatorship, resting not on the will of the people, but upon force and arms." As he introduced a bill that would have provided \$10,000,000 in relief to save the German people from starvation and help preserve their infant democracy, La Follette stressed that even if such immediate relief could be provided, deeper problems would remain. He prophesied, with chilling accuracy, "Until that infamous compact [the Treaty of Paris] and its sister treaties have been completely wiped out and replaced by enlightened understandings among the European nations, there will be no peace upon the continent or in the world, and all the pettifogging conferences, councils, and world courts will not prevent or seriously retard the new world war that is now rapidly developing from the seeds of malice, hatred and revenge that were sown at Versailles."²³

It was not enough, according to La Follette, for the United States simply to refrain from any further foreign entanglements. In his culminating article for the Hearst series, La Follette laid out his plans for an American foreign policy to replace what he termed the current

²²RML, Article 1, 1923, RLP, B-227, LFC.

²³Ibid.

“sporadic and contradictory manifestations” of State Department activity, tainted by private commercialism. His travels in Europe had convinced La Follette that America’s “tendency...toward imperialism and the support of financial exploitation of weaker countries,” had badly damaged the nation’s reputation abroad. “Your State Department and your diplomats,” La Follette quoted Europeans as saying, “do little to advance the interests of your nation as a world power, but they are superlatively active in promoting the interest of your financiers and corporations.”²⁴ La Follette’s solutions were essentially three fold:

Serve American concessionaires notice that neither the State Department nor the military would be used to promote their exploitation of foreign countries.

Ensure that foreign debts to the United States be rapidly repaid, for if they remained unsettled, and the money used instead to rearm European nations, the United States would carry a measure of responsibility.

Replace the Versailles Treaty with a new treaty of peace, signed by all European nations, including Germany and Russia, built upon foundations of liberty, equity, and justice.²⁵

Only this last, revised to read “Foreign policy to revise the Versailles Treaty and promote treaties to outlaw war, abolish conscription and reduce armaments” survived to become one of the eleven planks in La Follette’s official platform in the 1924 presidential campaign.

Although many of La Follette’s European observations focused on complicated foreign affairs issues, others detailed the kind of working practical examples for domestic adaptation celebrated by Daniel T. Rodgers. “I always wanted to...study the great co-operative movements

²⁴RML, Article Seven, B-227, RLP, LFC, 3.

²⁵See *Ibid.*, 3-6.

of producers and consumers,” La Follette asserted, for “[i]t has always been my opinion that we in America should study the social and economic developments in the older countries, and learn from their successes and failures whatever would be of benefit to the American people.”²⁶ He proudly noted that, under his governorship of Wisconsin, experts made readily available the data collected “from all the nations of the world on new developments in legislation, agriculture, industry, and commerce.” Two decades later, “[a]mid the chaos of political government in many parts of Europe,” it was for La Follette “a great pleasure and an inspiration to see the stability of the type of economic government represented by the cooperatives.” “I went to Europe to learn,” La Follette announced, and stated unequivocally, “The most inspiring thing that I saw in Europe was the way in which the co-operative organizations of producers and consumers have not only survived the wreckage of their political governments but in a majority of nations have increased greatly their power to protect the fundamental interest of their members.”²⁷

The first consumer cooperative was the Rochdale [England] Society of Equitable Pioneers established in 1844. The Society created a set of organizational and working rules including open membership, no religious or political discrimination, sales at prevailing market prices, and the setting aside of some earnings for education. The movement spread quickly throughout many areas where community residents believed that local retailers’ prices were too high or services were substandard. Cooperatives were created by urban working classes in Britain, France, Germany, and Sweden and among the rural populations of Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland. The cooperative approach was successfully applied to the processing and marketing of farm products, the purchasing of various types of equipment and raw materials, and in wholesaling, retailing, electric power, credit, banking, and housing—to virtually any industry in which participants were eager to exclude the expense and complications of “middle men.”²⁸ La Follette praised

²⁶ RML, “What I Saw in Europe: Germany Faces Famine,” *LM* (December 1923): 180.

²⁷ RML, “What I Saw in Europe: Co-operative Movement Serves as Barrier Between Rank and File and Predatory Interests; United States Must Stop Poincaire,” *LM* (February 1924): 26.

²⁸ See “cooperative” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*

European cooperatives for saving their members money and educating them in fundamental democracy. For his American readers, however, La Follette saved his highest praise for European cooperatives as “a barrier against the development of the types of monopolies and combinations that have become so great a menace to representative government in the United States.”²⁹

In his article, “Co-operative Movement Serves as Barrier Between Rank and File and Predatory Interests,” La Follette detailed the cooperatives he had visited in England, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, and Russia, citing specific cost and profit figures. In particular he celebrated the Danes who supported their families on tiny farms of no more than eight acres. These Danish farmers utilized no more scientific methods than their American counterparts on much larger farms, yet they enjoyed a higher standard of living due to the superiority of the cooperative methods of marketing and credit. Within the United States, La Follette warned, “we have neglected to give proper encouragement to one of the most important economic developments of the last century.” Even where American cooperatives existed, they were faulty, according to La Follette, paying “inflated salaries to their directors [and] managers.”³⁰

La Follette urged that a committee formed by citizens of the more progressive agricultural states make a thorough and authoritative report of the European cooperative situation. “One of the most important things to be done in the United States is to revise our federal and state laws” to replace obstacles to cooperative organizations with “all legitimate encouragement.” He concluded this section of his report on European conditions with this pledge: “I expect to devote a large part of my time and energy during the coming years to fostering the development of co-operation within the United States, because I see in this movement an opportunity for great good for the common man and a means of escape from the operation of the monopolies and combinations which are slowly

<http://search.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=26583&sctn=1> [16 August 2001].

²⁹ RML, “What I saw in Europe: Co-operative Movement Serves as Barrier” *LM* (February 1924): 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

but surely throttling the economic life of America.”³¹ Subsequent *La Follette's Magazine* articles sang the praises of the cooperative systems and agricultural advances in Denmark and England.³²

Although most of La Follette's energies were taken up with preparations for the coming presidential campaign, he also laid the groundwork for cooperatives by requiring that government step up its efforts to release farmers from the grip of various powerful monopolies. In February of 1924, he noted that bread made with American flour that was selling for 4 cents a pound in Europe was costing an average of 8.7 cents a pound in the United States. He credited the increasing distress and bankruptcy of wheat farmers on the resultant decrease in domestic bread consumption before concluding that “bread prices in American cities are artificially maintained at excessive levels, apparently by combinations and conspiracies in restraint of trade,” and, due to “a huge merger of baking companies...the production and distribution of bread has ceased to be a local industry and has in large measure assumed the character of interstate commerce.” Accordingly, he introduced Senate Resolution 163, directing the Federal Trade Commission to investigate the production and distribution of bread with special attention to be paid to “the extent and methods of price fixing, price maintenance, and price discrimination; the developments in the direction of monopoly and concentration of control of in the milling and baking industries, and all evidence indicating the existence of agreements, conspiracies, or conditions in restrained of trade.”³³ The resolution passed.

La Follette's proposed resolutions for agricultural relief extended beyond just wheat producers to include all farmers. As the 68th Congress neared its conclusion in the spring of 1924, La Follette moved that Congress should reconvene in July “in order to give immediate consideration to measures providing for the relief of agriculture,” measures he had initially introduced to Congress in January and referred to the

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

³² See Olive Dame Campbell, “Education Brought Denmark Freedom,” *LM* (June 1924): 92-93 and “Growth of English Co-operatives,” *LM* (September 1924): 132.

³³ RML, CR 65, pt. 3:2541.

Committee on Interstate Commerce.³⁴ Arguing that “the farmer is suffering chiefly from artificial disadvantages...saddled upon his back by act of Congress or by policies of the executive branch of government,” La Follette cited three “wicked assaults” on agriculture before proposing a solution. He first denounced the Esch-Cummins Railroad Law of 1920, “which brought a gigantic freight rate increase, unprecedented in railroad history, which has since made it impossible for farmers in many sections to move their products to market at a profit.” This devastating blow had been compounded that same year by the “ruinous ‘deflation’ policy” originating in the Senate and carried out by the “organized banking power,” which “plunged thousands of farmers into bankruptcy,” and made credit on fair terms unavailable to farmers. These two factors were “sufficient to prostrate the farmer,” but still another was added: a “robber tariff law” imposing “enormously increased taxes” on “everything” the farmer buys. The Department of Justice, according to La Follette, left monopolies unchecked and gave illegal combinations “a freehand in manipulating the markets” in which farmers sold their products. La Follette’s formal resolution cited dramatic statistics on the rise in farm bankruptcies and foreclosures since 1920 and the resultant rise in bank failures. The emergency legislation he proposed included economic relief to struggling farmers directly, and in the form of railroad rate reductions, first steps in his plan to have government aid farmers in creating European-style cooperatives. Although La Follette’s resolution to reconvene was defeated by a vote of fifty-two to thirty-six, his efforts kept Congress and the American people aware of the growing number of bankrupt farmers and the “acute agricultural distress” throughout the nation.³⁵

The full text of La Follette’s announcement of his third party bid for the presidency makes plain that La Follette sought to implement within the United States what he had observed operating successfully in Europe. One section noted approvingly the control of the government by the

³⁴ RML, “The Administration Turns its Back on the Farmer,” *LM* (June 1924): 83. See also RML, *CR* 65, pt. 1:981.

³⁵ RML, “Administration Turns its Back,” *LM* (June 1924): 83.

people in nations including France and Great Britain before asserting that “the American people must likewise control their own government...before we can hope for world stability....”³⁶ Another section, entitled “Co-operation the Cure,” began with the assertion that the American farmer “realizes that so long as the government permits monopoly to crush out his co-operatives with cut-throat competition, control the prices of his products at will, and curtail his credit, there can be no sound, permanent prosperity for agriculture.” The solution was a federal commitment to follow the successful European agricultural model: “It is the duty of government to aid the farmer in the organization and development of a national co-operative marketing system....”³⁷

As election day approached, La Follette continued to appeal to farmers (who figured disproportionately among his supporters) with his conviction that “a Progressive administration, free from the control of the interests which unjustly profit at the expense of both the farmer and the consumer, could aid the farmers...in establishing a co-operative system.”

He illustrated the benefits of such a system by comparing the forty cents on the dollar paid to American farmers to the eighty cents Danish farmers received for the same products. All Americans, including farmers and workers, La Follette concluded, would benefit from following the European example.³⁸

It is difficult to assess just how much of La Follette’s presidential platform on both domestic and foreign issues was inspired by what he saw in Europe, but the composition of La Follette voters provides some clues as to the appeal of his proposed policies. About half of La Follette’s nearly five million votes came from farmers and a fifth each from union members and socialists. La Follette’s ability to garner more than five times the highest previous total for a candidate endorsed by the Socialists led one 1999 analyst to conclude that in 1924 La Follette conducted “the most successful leftwing Presidential campaign in American history,” a success attributable at least in part to La Follette’s citing European solutions in his

³⁶ “Full Text of La Follette’s Announcement,” *LM* (July 1924): 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸ RML, “Why the Farmer is Progressive,” *LM* (September 1924): 130-1.

continuing calls for domestic, particularly agricultural, reform.³⁹ Garnering nearly seventeen percent of the vote, La Follette ran second in eleven and midwestern states, but won only Wisconsin in the electoral college.

Based on dollars spent per vote, La Follette was the most successful third party candidate in the twentieth century. La Follette, however, privately viewed his 1924 presidential bid as a humiliating loss. In the sense that it was intended to help him capture the presidency, La Follette's European sojourn could also be considered a failure. And, according to that kind of conventional thinking, by 1925 La Follette had lost the bulk of his political and social influence as the Republican caucus adopted a resolution depriving him and other progressives of committee rank. However, viewed through the lens provided by Daniel Rodgers, a very different picture emerges. Although La Follette's journey abroad did not give his presidential campaign the authority he intended, it was nonetheless part of a movement that made a variety of lasting contributions. Less than a year after La Follette's failed attempt to push farm relief measures through Congress, for example, his efforts to apply European solutions to the plight of American farmers were taken up by President Calvin Coolidge, who commissioned an agricultural study examining the possibilities for government "leadership and assistance" in creating cooperative marketing associations.⁴⁰

La Follette denied the continuing erosion of his health, but his efforts to devise a series of ambitious political plans in the spring of 1925 were stymied by a string of heart attacks and by his increasing dependence on nitroglycerine and pain medication. He died on 18 June, four days after his seventieth birthday. The European press, while echoing many of the

³⁹John Nichols, "Portrait of the Founder, Fighting Bob La Follette," *The Progressive* 63, (1) (January 1999):10. See "Senator La Follette's Pre-Convention Statement," and "Press Comment on the La Follette Statement," *LM* (June 1924):84-5. Wisconsin remained something of a Socialist stronghold. Victor Berger regained his House seat in 1923 and Socialists remained in various positions of political power in Milwaukee until 1960. See David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 185,189.

⁴⁰"Cooperation Hailed as Farmers' Hope," *LM* (February 1925): 25.

tributes carried by domestic newspapers, noted in particular that within the United States La Follette "had the support of many 'radical' farmers' associations which had been gaining in strength lately, and of many of the more moderate labour leaders, as well as many liberal thinkers and politicians."⁴¹ Even *Pravda*, while denouncing La Follette for remaining "a typical representative of the petty bourgeoisie," praised him for his efforts to prohibit American interference in Soviet affairs and for his "number of demands in defense of farmers."⁴²

After La Follette's death, *La Follette's Magazine* continued to sing the praises of various European cooperative efforts as effective weapons against the powerful trusts that were continuing to ravage American farmers, to report various European agricultural and technological innovations, and to promote cooperatives as the "Farmers' Hope." There are other indications that La Follette's urging of Americans to look to Europe for important lessons did not fall entirely on deaf ears. Members of the American left heeded La Follette's call for recognition of the Soviet Union and many witnessed the Soviet experiment firsthand. The American Education Delegation, for example, which included La Follette's daughter, Fola, traveled to the Soviet Union in 1928. There the delegation's leader, enormously influential progressive educator John Dewey, found the near fulfillment of his philosophic hopes: "The main effort is nobly heroic, evincing a faith in human nature which is democratic beyond the ambitions of the democracies of the past."⁴³ The several hundred economists, labor leaders, artists, leaders of ethnic minorities, social scientists, business leaders, social workers, and reformers, including La Follette, who went to the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1932 and publicized their impressions, played a large role in transforming American thought, influencing many intellectual and social leaders to consider the Soviet Union a kind of "conscience-model" of experimentation for the New Deal.⁴⁴

⁴¹ "Senator La Follette," *The London Times* (19 June 1925): 15d.

⁴² "The Death of La Follette," *Pravda* (20 June 1925): 3.

⁴³ Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 104.

⁴⁴ See *Ibid.*, 100-40.

In his 1936 memoir, Republican Senator James Watson noted, “If one will take the trouble to examine the platform of 1924 on which Robert M. La Follette ran...[one] will find very many of the identical propositions embodied that are now being put into execution by the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and, furthermore, a closer examination will reveal the fact that many of the very men who are now engaged in aiding President Roosevelt were in Wisconsin at that time helping La Follette.”⁴⁵ Indeed, during the 1924 campaign, Republican Harold Ickes’s “inexpressible disgust” for Coolidge led, he said, to his “almost overpowering inclination to pack my playthings and go off with the lunatic fringe,” culminating in his becoming La Follette’s mid-western campaign manager.⁴⁶ Ickes consistently backed Democrats after 1924. He ultimately converted, becoming Secretary of the Interior under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Other key La Follette supporters who subsequently worked to further FDR’s goals include Senators George Norris, Robert La Follette Jr. (a member of the 1923 entourage who eventually served 21 years in the Senate), and Burton K. Wheeler. La Follette devotee David K. Niles was Roosevelt’s Executive Secretary and Basil Manly (who was also with La Follette in Europe in 1923) served on the Federal Power Commission under FDR.

Other Americans less directly tied to La Follette shared his enthusiasm for political, social, and economic elements of the young Soviet Union, and urged their application at home. In 1927, American Trade Union delegate Stuart Chase, for example, witnessed the “courageous and unprecedented [Soviet] experiment” firsthand. Five years later he wrote a book whose title *A New Deal*, gave currency to that popular phrase and concept. “Why,” he asked within its pages concerning production and distribution, “should the Russians have all the fun of remaking a world?”⁴⁷ Elements found in La Follette’s 1924 presidential platform (some of which were influenced by La Follette’s European

⁴⁵MacKay, *Progressive Movement*, 258-9.

⁴⁶James Robertson, *No Third Choice: Progressives in Republican Politics, 1916-1921*, (New York: Garland, 1983) 302-3. See also MacKay, *Progressive Movement*, 175-6.

⁴⁷Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals*, 107-8.

observations the previous year) that came to life in the New Deal include the TVA, progressive income and inheritance tax schedules, the National Labor Relations Act, various aid programs to agriculture (most notably the Agricultural Adjustment Act), the Securities Exchange Commission and the abolition of child labor.

Daniel Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings* ends with World War II. Robert La Follette's legacy indicates that Rodgers could extend his thesis into even more recent times. While the agricultural cooperatives La Follette admired in Europe never took hold within the United States on the grand scale he envisioned, some elements of his view that government has an obligation to remedy depressed farm prices and instability still persist in the form of aid to farmers, including price supports, tax relief, and loan assistance. Some of the larger lessons La Follette learned in Europe persist as well. In 1999, Doug La Follette, one of the founders of the first Earth Day and in his fifth term as Wisconsin's Secretary of State, credited Robert La Follette Sr., his first cousin twice removed, as the inspiration for the lifelong political activism of many Americans, himself included.⁴⁸ Nearly forty years after La Follette's death, his warnings concerning the potential for American imperialism, especially the dangers of ill-conceived pacts and commitments still wielded influence: the two Senate votes against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution committing the United States to war in Vietnam were cast by Oregon's Wayne Morse, a Wisconsin native impressed by La Follette in his youth, and Alaska's Ernest Gruening, a La Follette spokesman in the 1924 campaign. La Follette's warnings could no more stop America's involvement in Vietnam than they could prevent World War II--but the impressions of what he and other Americans saw in Europe remain a part of a progressive legacy that even today inspires people to think, to challenge, and to struggle for what they believe is right--individually, nationally, and globally.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Doug La Follette to author, telephone interview, 3 February 1999.

⁴⁹Nichols, "Portrait of the Founder," *Progressive* 63 (1) (January 1999):12. For more on La Follette's political legacy, see Arthur Altmeyer, "The Wisconsin Idea and Social Security," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 42 (Autumn 1958):19-25. Alan Havig, "A Disputed Legacy: Roosevelt Progressives and the La Follette Campaign of 1924," *Mid-America* 1971 53 (1):44-64, and Otis Graham, *An Encore For Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

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