Book Review: The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas by Robert Zaretsky

In **The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas***,* **Robert Zaretsky** *offers a new biography of the influential French thinker through exploring five key concepts within her body of work. Zaretsky's thematic study will inspire readers to find resistance in the power of paying deep attention, just as Weil passionately and convincingly argued, writes* **Fouad Mami***.*

***The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas*. Robert Zaretsky. University of Chicago Press. 2021.**

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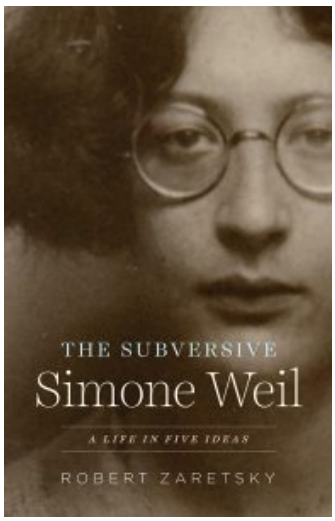

Robert Zaretsky's biography of the French thinker Simone Weil (1909-43) provides non-French-speaking readers with a taste of the incendiary logos of European radicalism. Fuelling Weil's radicalism is the conceptual clarity that throughout the ages has galvanised the oppressed – enslaved people, peasants, women, workers and the unemployed – against manifold oppressions.

Born to and raised in a liberal, middle-class Jewish family, Weil fought tooth and nail to upset the non-egalitarian conditions of the world around her. She undertook long train journeys to French villages for the purpose of extending education to coal miners and other workers. In order to authentically report on the degrading conditions of the working class, she literally begged factory and coal mine managers for permission to experience what it is to toil for up to fourteen hours a day in furnaces and mining pits. In spite of her fragile physique, she enlisted twice in armed combat (the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and World War II for France in 1942) out of the moral obligation to end injustice, regardless of the identity of the victims and perpetrators. She adamantly refused to consume more calories than those rationed to French villagers living under German occupation knowing that she herself was working for the resistance from London. In starving herself, she exacerbated the tuberculosis from which she died in 1943.

Zaretsky, a historian based at Houston University, traces the governing dynamics behind a life that several classmates and intimate acquaintances described as the 'Categorical Imperative in skirts'. Weil led an exhilaratingly radical and exceptionally passionate existence. With Weil, ideas that did not translate into a living, breathing reality were not worth one's time. Hence, her diligence for educating the marginalised through compassion as well as a commitment to altering their material reality for the better. Goodness, she defined, as that constant agitation to free the disadvantaged from incoherence. Not only do the disadvantaged deserve a chance to smoothly articulate their thoughts, but she also underscored how one's own humanity remains severely lacking when failing to commit to this cause. Such a frame of mind stood behind her conviction to take up arms and help in causes for the public good on two key occasions: the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

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Image Credit: 'Paris 13e arrondissement – Rue Simone-Weil – plaque de rue' by Ordifana75 licensed under CC BY SA 3.0

The Subversive Simone Weil explores five key ideas: affliction; attention; resistance; rootedness; and the good. Given how the contemporary world is bent on consumption, many have become complicit in their own misery. Readers may therefore benefit from seizing on Weil's concepts, as elucidated in this book.

Chapter One, 'The Force of Affliction', teases out the concept of affliction, which is Zaretsky's translation of the French word *malheur*. It denotes that state of mind where marginalised and impoverished people are systematically rendered incapable of thinking. Sheer exhaustion from physical labour leaves factory workers and peasants literally with no time to consistently trace the source of their misery. Affliction thus suffocates the possibility of reversing wage slavery because self-reflection and articulation remain beyond the reach of the afflicted. Workers are condemned to stay forever preoccupied with their immediate needs.

In Chapter Two, 'Paying Attention', Zaretsky underlines Weil's unorthodox reading habits. For Weil, submersion in the humdrum of the everyday is her antidote to affliction. In paying attention to the quotidian, the ethical opens the horizon for the epistemological, not the reverse. If thinking becomes conceived as an independent totality, unconnected from the pursuit of the good, that thinking becomes a pathology and has to be condemned as such. One becomes aware not only of the journey that epistemological discovery involves, but also the moral cost of the convictions embraced. The activity depends more on waiting than seeking. Authentic attention-paying reveals how the misfortune, ignorance, shortcomings or successes of others impact us too, no matter how much we are aware of this impact or not.

Chapter Three, 'The Varieties of Resistance', accelerates Weil's findings about paying attention. Resistance works better if approached via the imagery of peeling off inattention. Going against conformity activates the Antigone figure: the one who dares to stand against the laws that stem from sedimented but often outmoded convictions. Still, resisting conformity remains first and foremost an ethical obligation, which is but another instantiation of mental clarity.

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Aside from being a geostrategic miscalculation, the French defeat of 1940 before the fascist forces was a situation, according to Weil, that resulted from attaching a price tag to all that is valued. 'Rootlessness' is Weil's term for what Karl Marx specified as alienation from the natural order of things. Rootlessness manifests in the atomisation of perception, where every object becomes pursued for its own sake and where the totality of phenomena remains largely incomprehensible. Rootlessness is not limited to the dynamics inside the factory or the workshop, as it afflicts all social classes, even those who do not have to sell their labour in order to survive. Because it is all-powerful, rootlessness triggers thoughtlessness, and both force a debilitating self-image that leads to docility and domestication.

Weil, through 'rootedness', calls for a new type of patriotism, one that lies beyond the mere political and subscribes to the Christian maxim of loving thy neighbour. Finding roots for Weil is never a conservative call or a pathological display of ego. She stands adamantly against the abuse of patriotism. Zaretsky cleverly draws on the notion of the nation as giving a false sense of rootedness which politicians excel in selling as authentic. Indeed, this false rootedness resonates with rising fascism in contemporary times. It seeks to fill the ontological desert pushed by nationalist ideologies as the latter fails to back up promises of better standards of living. Weil ridicules the orthodox definition of the nation. In doing so, she demarcates a space for healthy belonging: rootedness.

Chapter Five, 'The Good, the Bad and the Godly', unpacks Weil's concept of *décreation*, or God's withdrawal through the screen of necessity so that humans recall his absence through love. Faith becomes the pursuit of God via nothing less than the enactment of the good. Because Weil lived in times where people were no longer required to think but simply asked to take sides, for or against, the enactment of the good starts by the acknowledgement of complexity and the refusal of simplistic divisions between good or bad.

Throughout Zaretsky's rendition of Weil's key ideas, one cannot but think of affliction as underlying the mediocrity that shapes education in a number of nations. The pursuit of qualifications for their own sake suffocates the promise of learning. For true learning involves paying attention – an activity that specifies less the filling of students' heads and more the sculpting of their respective spirits. Voluntary teaching had been Weil's way of starting revolution. In seeking to extend learning to workers, Weil aimed to instigate an incendiary consciousness that would watch over the slow but certain metamorphosis towards a more egalitarian order. Learning in this way allows the marginalised the chance to reverse inattention (or alienation). Paying attention eventually leads to mastering the art of lucid expression, an extrication from muddled thinking, which paves the way for lasting emancipation.

Still, Weil's revulsion at theory and abstractions and her insistence on engagement and experience can sometimes become problematic. Readers may wonder if this interpretation reflects Weil's precise stance or the biographer's own rendition. Indeed, can one engage in experience without theoretical armament, without running the risk of critical oversight? According to Zaretsky, Weil should have been more horrified by the Nazi atrocities and stopped drawing comparisons with the fate of Algerians and other subjects suffering under the yoke of French imperialism. Yet, this would conflict with Weil's own ethos anchored in radical universalism, one that is synonymous with rootedness, refusing conceptual coercion dictated by either political calculations or ethical oversight.

Still, any sensible reader cannot but fully subscribe to the ways Zaretsky projects Weil's ideas as these help us to think and effectively respond to how nationalists such as former US President Donald Trump or dictators such as Egypt's General Sissi have dominated the contemporary political spectrum. Overall, Zaretsky's thematic biography of Weil facilitates readers' resistance to inattentive pastimes — all in the pursuit of attention that paves the way for the dismantling of the 'I', the way Weil passionately and convincingly specified.

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